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# Answering Contemporary Western Islamic Polemics

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A major consequence of the immigration of Muslims to western countries since the 1960s is the emergence of Islamic missionary propagation, with a decidedly polemical character. In Islam, mission—*da'wah*—is a *Shari'ah* obligation, especially if Muslims wish to remain in a non-Muslim state. Since most western countries have a traditional Christian cultural allegiance to one degree or another, Islamic polemics in the West have centred on demolishing Christian distinctive, such as the Trinity, which are at odds with Islamic beliefs.

Increasingly, in countries like Britain, there is intensifying Christian-Muslim polemical competition, especially in places such as universities (between Christian Unions and Islamic Societies) and at public fora, such as the famous Hyde Park Speakers' Corner. In recent years, Islamic polemicists have refined their attacks, utilis-

ing liberal biblical studies, to undermine the credibility of the biblical text and canon. This usage has its origins in the claim of the Qur'an that the *Tawrah* (Torah) and *Injil* (Gospel) predict the coming of Muhammad. It is clear that no such prophecy exists in the Bible. The logical consequence for Muslims is that the Bible has been changed!

Muslims are somewhat hazy about the *when*, *where* and *who* of this 'conspiracy', but usually the Apostle Paul is blamed as the man who compromised the pure teaching of Jesus by infecting it with pagan beliefs. Usually, it is claimed that Constantine finalised this process at the Council of Nicaea, where it is asserted that the canon of the New Testament was also decided. Often obscure figures are quoted in support of such theses, which inevitably leaves Christians puzzled. A recent phenomenon in Islamic propaganda is to claim that the original Christians were the Ebionites, a second-century Jewish-Christian sect who rejected Paul—again, an issue about which few Christians know anything.

Obviously, the average Christian is

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not academically equipped to deal with such issues, and so is sometimes at a loss in how he should respond to such attacks. What material exists is spread over a large number of volumes, and is not immediately accessible. Furthermore, it is often unsuitable to give to Muslims because it is not phrased in a way that would be intelligible to a Muslim—naturally, because it has been produced by scholars in the fields of Biblical Studies or Church History, rather than Islamic Studies. In an echo of this, such material that answers Muslims to some degree is usually produced by missionaries or counter-polemicists who are not *au fait* with academic Biblical Studies, and are unfamiliar with the detailed albeit often obscure issues in modern Islamic polemics. It is for this reason I have written a book answering most of the major arguments in contemporary western Islamic propaganda against Christianity, in order to equip Christians with the answers to such attacks.

## I Modern Islamic Polemics against the Bible

Almost the first claim that a Christian will hear when meeting a Muslim is that the Bible has been changed. For the most part, the assertion is the product of a logical consequence of Islamic theology. Surah *As-Saff* 61:6 of the Qur'an claims that the *Tawrah* (Torah) and *Injil* (Gospel) predict the coming of Ahmad, i.e. Muhammad, yet it is clear that such is not the case. Also, Surah Baqarah 2:135 claims that all prophets, including Jesus and Muhammad, taught the same message, yet it is clear that along a whole panorama of

doctrines, not least Jesus' claim to divinity (John 8:58), this is also invalid. So, to the Muslim mind, if the Bible contradicts the Qur'an, it follows that Christians must have tampered with their Scriptures!

Increasingly Muslim propagandists are using various sceptical writers in their polemics. Sometimes, it seems as if deliberately obscure figures are quoted to baffle even Christian academics. A typical example is this quote from *The Dead Sea Scrolls, The Gospel of Barnabas and the New Testament* by Islamic polemicist, M. A. Yusseff:

...Victor Tununensis, a sixth century African Bishop, who related in his Chronicle (AD 566) that when Messala was consul at Constantinople (AD 506), he *censored and corrected* the Gentile Gospels written by persons considered illiterate by the Emperor Anastasius. The implication was that they were altered to conform to sixth century Christianity, which differed from the Christianity of previous centuries.<sup>1</sup>

This reference to Victor Tununensis is found in a number of modern Islamic publications and websites. How many Christians have even heard of Victor Tununensis? He is probably an obscure figure even to Christian *academics*. This very fact aids anti-Christian polemics; it makes Christians look ignorant, and also suggests that Christian leaders have something to hide—implying that

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1 M. A. Yusseff, *The Dead Sea Scrolls, The Gospel of Barnabas and the New Testament* (Indianapolis: American trust Publications, 1993), 81.

it might be true that the Christian have indeed altered their sacred texts. The average Christian interacting with Muslims would be stumped.

The facts concern the Monophysite Byzantine Emperor Anastasius I, who deposed Macedonius II, Patriarch of Constantinople, replacing him with a Monophysite. This action provoked riots and a revolt in Thrace in 512. Anastasius was determined to undermine Chalcedonian orthodoxy, and its adherents:

The heterodox emperor Anastasius employed all means to oblige Macedonius to declare against the council of Chalcedon, but flattery and threats were alike unavailing... One of his instruments was Xenaias, an Eutychian bishop... Xenaias... procured two infamous wretches, who... charged him with Nestorianism, and with having falsified a passage in an epistle of St. Paul, in support of that sect.<sup>2</sup>

Macedonius was replaced by an ardent Monophysite, Timothy, who proceeded to harass pro-Chalcedonians. Timothy convened the illegitimate Synod of Sidon in 512, of which Victor comments in his *Chronicon*:

Anastasius imperator haereticorum synodum faciens Henoticum Zenonis confirmat, et Euphemium episcopum Constantinopolitanum Chalcedonensis synodi defensorem

deponit; quem Euchaida in exsilium mittens, pro eo Macedonium facit.<sup>3</sup>

The Emperor Anastasius, making a Council of heretics, confirmed the Henoticon of Zeno, and deposed Euphemius, bishop of Constantinople, a defender of the Council of Chalcedon; sending him into exile in Euchaida, he appointed Macedonius in his place.<sup>4</sup>

Immediately it is clear that Victor was hostile to Anastasius and his actions, calling the Sidon synod convened by the Emperor's protégé Timothy, 'a Council of heretics'. This must be underlined, because Yusseff wholly misconstrues what Victor was saying about Anastasius. Yusseff presents the quote as an 'admission by Bishop Tununensis', whereas in fact it is a condemnation!<sup>5</sup> Here is what Victor actually says in his *Chronicon*:

Constantinopoli, jubente Anastasio imperatore, sancta Evangelia tanquam ab idiotis evangelistis composita, reprehenduntur et emendantur.<sup>6</sup>

At Constantinople, by the command of the Emperor Anastasius, the holy Gospels, as if compositions from unlearned Evangelists, were censured and emended.<sup>7</sup>

2 Henry Wace, & William C. Pierce, *A Dictionary of Early Christian Biography and Literature to the End of the Sixth Century A.D., with an Account of the Principal Sects and Heresies* (London: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1911), CCEL.

3 Jacques-Paul Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, (first published 1844-1865), 'Victoris Chronicon', *Patrologia Latina Database*, <http://pld.chadwyck.com/>

4 I am indebted to the Rev. Eryl Rowlands for this translation.

5 Yusseff, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, 81.

6 Migne, 'Victoris Chronicon', *Patrologia Latina Database*, <http://pld.chadwyck.com/>

7 Again my thanks to Eryl Rowlands.

It appears from the context that Messalla, the consul, rather than being responsible for this action, is simply the reference for the quote. Nor is there any reference to 'Gentile' gospels. The great nineteenth century textual critic S. P. Tregelles actually refers to this event, but does so by first quoting the sixth century Chalcedonian writer Liberatus of Carthage (who was therefore roughly contemporaneous with Victor, and also in North Africa):

In addition to the evidence of the MSS., versions, and early citations, there is a narrative which relates to this passage. According to this narrative, Macedonius, Patriarch of Constantinople, was deprived by the Emperor Anastasius, anno 506, for having corrupted the Scriptures (called in the account "evangelia," as a general term), especially in this passage, by changing one letter so as to make OC into ΘC.<sup>8</sup>

This is what Liberatus writes in his *A Short Account of the Affair of the Nestorians and Eutychians (Breviarium causae Nestorianorum et Eutychianorum)*:

Hoc tempore Macedonius Constantinopolitanus episcopus, ab imperatore Anastasio dicitur expulsus, tanquam Evangelia falsasset, et maxime illud Apostoli dictum: *Quia apparuit in carne, justificatum est in spiritu*. Hunc enim immu-

tasse, ubi habet, ὅς id est, *qui monosyllabum Graecum, littera mutata o in ω vertisse, et fecisse, ὡς, id est, ut esset Deus, apparuit per carnem*. Tanquam Nestorianus ergo culpatus expellitur per Severum monachum.<sup>9</sup>

In this time, Macedonius, bishop of Constantinople, was expelled by the Emperor Anastasius (it was said), as he had falsified the Gospels and above all that word of the Apostle, "Who appeared in the flesh, was justified in the Spirit". For he had altered this, where it has ΟΣ, that is, WHO, a Greek monosyllable, he had changed Ο into Θ, and made ΘΣ, that is, in order that it might be, "GOD appeared in the flesh..." He was expelled, therefore, as a convicted Nestorian by the monk Severus.<sup>10</sup>

A footnote in Tregelles' book states: 'The same transaction regarding Macedonius and the corruption of Scripture is referred to in the *Chronicon* of Victor.'<sup>11</sup> Hence, it would seem that when we link his statement with the chronicle of Liberatus, Victor is actually referring to the fact that Anastasius made the false accusation that

<sup>8</sup> Samuel Prieaux Tregelles, *An Account of the Printed Text of the Greek New Testament; with Remarks on its Revision upon Critical Principles, together with a collation of the critical texts of Griesbach, Scholz, Lachmann, and Tischendorf, with that in common use*, (London: Samuel Bagster and sons, 1854), 229.

<sup>9</sup> Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, 'Breviarium Causae Nestorianorum et Eutychianorum, collectum a Liberato archidiacono Ecclesiae Carthaginensis regionis sextae', [http://pld.chadwyck.com/all/fulltext?ALL=Y&ACTION=byid&warn=N&div=3&id=Z300033301&FILE=../session/1156435298\\_24652&CURDB=pld](http://pld.chadwyck.com/all/fulltext?ALL=Y&ACTION=byid&warn=N&div=3&id=Z300033301&FILE=../session/1156435298_24652&CURDB=pld)

<sup>10</sup> Again my thanks to Eryl Rowlands.

<sup>11</sup> Tregelles, *An Account of the Printed Text of the Greek New Testament*, 229.

Macedonius had 'tampered' with the Biblical text—a trumped-up charge to remove him.

In the case of the text in question, 1 Timothy 3:16, there are two main variant readings, going back to at least the fourth century—some time before Macedonius. *Theos*, ΘΕΟΣ, the Greek word for 'God', was often abbreviated as ΘΣ, and it would be easy for a tired copyist to mistake this for the more probable reading—ΟΣ, 'Who'. Yet none of this ever appears in Islamic propaganda surrounding the issue—but how many Christians would be able to present the facts to Muslim propagandists?

Another popular Islamic polemical work is that of Misha'al Kadhi, *What Did Jesus Really Say?*, where we read this:

It is impossible to deny that the Benedictine Monks of St. Maur, as far as Latin and Greek language went, were very learned and talented, as well as numerous body of men. In Cleland's 'Life of Lanfranc, Archbishop of Canterbury', is the following passage: 'Lanfranc, a Benedictine Monk, Archbishop of Canterbury, having found the Scriptures much corrupted by copyists, applied himself to correct them, as also the writings of the fathers, agreeably to the orthodox faith, secundum fidem orthodoxam.

History of Christianity in the light of Modern knowledge, Higgins p. 318

In other words, the Christian scriptures were re-written in order to conform to the doctrines of the eleventh and twelfth centuries and

even the writings of the early church fathers were 'corrected' so that the changes would not be discovered. Sir Higgins goes on to say:

The same Protestant divine has this remarkable passage: 'Impartiality exacts from me the confession, that the orthodox have in some places altered the Gospels'.

The author then goes on to demonstrate how a massive effort was undertaken in Constantinople, Rome, Canterbury, and the Christian world in general in order to 'correct' the Gospels and destroy all manuscripts before this period.<sup>12</sup>

One can almost hear the cry, 'Who is this Higgins fellow?'. Sir Godfrey Higgins (1773-1833), a Yorkshire squire and Freemason, was a political and religious radical, whose theological radicalism took the form of esoteric religious writings. Amongst his 'esoteric' notions was the idea that: '...Ireland was colonised by a tribe from the East, and particularly from Phœnicia'.<sup>13</sup> Higgins had an innovative suggestion regarding the origin of the Jews; rather than being descended from a 'wandering Aramaean' from Mesopotamia (Deuteronomy 26:5), they actually came from India (!):

...if the history of Abraham can be believed, the Jews, properly so

<sup>12</sup> Misha'al Abdullah al Kadhi, *What Did Jesus Really Say?*, <http://media.isnet.org/off/Islam/JesusSay/ch2.1.html>

<sup>13</sup> Godfrey Higgins, *Anacalypsis: An Attempt to Draw Aside the Veil of the Saitic Isis: Or an Inquiry into the Origin of Languages, Nations and Religions*, Part 1, (USA: Kessinger Publishing, 2002, originally published in 1833), 443.

called, were all descendants of that Chaldaean Brahmin, and of the 318 persons said to be bred in his own house, who probably constituted the whole of the tribe, or of the high caste of the tribe, who had come with him from India.<sup>14</sup>

Comment is superfluous. The point to make is: where is the primary evidence for Higgins' assertion about the Bible? What specific manuscripts are the Roman See, Lanfranc and the Monks of St. Maur said to have corrupted? Who is the anonymous 'Protestant divine'?

In regard to the specific quote in *What Did Jesus Really Say?*, readers who knew nothing of Lanfranc and the Monks of St. Maur might assume that they were contemporaries, even that Lanfranc was their leader. In fact, the French congregation of the Benedictine monks of St. Maur began only in 1618-21.<sup>15</sup> Hence, they could not have done anything to the manuscripts of the Bible and the Early Church Fathers in 'the eleventh and twelfth centuries'! The Maurist monks were renowned for their patristic and biblical scholarship, and there seems to have been no accusations of manuscript tampering against them except in the fantasies of Higgins. As for Lanfranc, he lived c. 1005-1089. His career largely concerned both ecclesiastical and political statesmanship.

## II Islamic Utilisation of the Jesus Seminar and Bart Ehrman

We have spent some time on the preceding two figures, Victor Tununensis and Higgins because they are so frequently quoted by various Islamic polemicists today and because they are so obscure. Readers will be more aware of *The Jesus Seminar* and Bart Ehrman.

*Before Nicea*, a work by two western converts to Islam, devotes considerable space to the Seminar, alleging that it consists of none but famous academics in field of biblical scholarship: '*The Five Gospels* written by the '*Jesus Seminar*,' a group of *seventy four renowned Christian scholars from biblical studies institutes and universities all over the world*, was the result of six years of dedicated study.'<sup>16</sup> No evidence is offered to support this daring claim that all these 'seventy four' are 'renowned' and from 'all over the world'. Many scholars, such as Richard Hays, Luke Timothy Johnson, Ben Witherington III and N. T. Wright, have examined—and debunked—the claims of the Seminar, and there is no need to reproduce their work here.

The authors of *Before Nicea* recognise to some extent the subjective character of the Seminar in their comment that 'the main body' of the Seminar's work 'is concerned with demythologizing the gospels' and using a 'consensus' of 'opinion' aimed

14 Godfrey Higgins, *Anacalypsis*, 310.

15 Leslie A. St. L. Toke, 'The Maurists', *Catholic Encyclopedia*, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10069b.htm>

16 AbdulHaq Al-Ashanti, and Abdur-Rahman Bowes, *Before Nicea: The Early Followers of Prophet Jesus*, (UK: JamiahMedia, 2005), 35ff (emphasis original).

at determining 'the authenticity of the sayings of Jesus, which may be unacceptable', but nonetheless they quote 'from their book that which is attested to by historical evidence'.<sup>17</sup> Significantly, *Before Nicea* ignores the fact that the Seminar's founder, Robert Funk, once wrote: 'I am mortified by either the ignorance or the dissembling of TV evangelists and others who endorse fundamentalism and literalisms in the name of Christianity. I am worried by the failure of the scholarship of Islam to enter the modern age.'<sup>18</sup>

The fact is that Funk was basically attacking *Muslims* for failing to apply the techniques of the historical-critical method to their sacred texts; indeed, we may go further—Funk was critiquing Muslims for failing to 'demythologise' the Qur'an and Hadith, in the same way that he attempted to do with the Bible. Essentially, the template that the Seminar uses for debunking the Bible would have the same effect on the Qur'an!

For example, Surah Al-i-Imran 3:45ff affirms the virgin birth of Jesus.<sup>19</sup> This is what Funk wrote about the virgin birth: 'The virgin birth of Jesus is an

insult to modern intelligence and should be abandoned. In addition, it is a pernicious doctrine that denigrates women.'<sup>20</sup> Nothing suggests that Funk would have found the Qur'anic account any more acceptable than the Gospel narrative, and in the light of his demand for Islamic scholarship to 'enter the modern age'—i.e. to embrace the historical-critical method as he practised it—we can safely assume that Funk would have rejected the Islamic account as vehemently as the biblical one. This should be brought to the attention of Islamic polemicists who utilise the Seminar's writings.

The many popular works of the agnostic scholar Bart Ehrman are frequently quoted by Muslims, and his books are regularly on sale in Islamic bookstores. Often Muslims will refer to him as a *Christian* scholar, unaware of his agnosticism. *Before Nicea* quotes Ehrman's book, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture* on the issue of manuscript variants and the fact that we do not possess the autographs:

Ehrman mentions: 'In any event, none of the original manuscripts of the books of the Bible now survive. What do survive are copies made over the course of centuries, or more accurately, copies of the copies of the copies, some 5366 of them in the Greek language alone, that date from the second century down to the sixteenth. Strikingly, with the exception of the smallest fragments, no two of these copies are exact. No one knows how many

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17 *Before Nicea*, 8.

18 Robert W. Funk, 'A Few Good People', *The Fourth R*, Volume 15, 3, May/June 2002, [http://www.westarinstitute.org/Periodicals/4R\\_Articles/Editorial15-3/editorial15-3.html](http://www.westarinstitute.org/Periodicals/4R_Articles/Editorial15-3/editorial15-3.html)

19 Surah Al-i-Imran 3:45: '45 (And remember) when the angels said: O Mary! Allah giveth thee glad tidings of a word from Him, whose name is the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary...47 She said: My Lord! How can I have a child when no mortal hath touched me? He said: ... Allah createth what He will... He saith unto it only: Be! and it is.'

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20 Funk, 'The Coming Radical Reformation', [http://www.westarinstitute.org/Periodicals/4R\\_Articles/Funk\\_Theses/funk\\_theses.html](http://www.westarinstitute.org/Periodicals/4R_Articles/Funk_Theses/funk_theses.html)



different, or variant readings, occur among the surviving witnesses, but they must number in the hundreds of thousands.<sup>21</sup>

The authors are not quoting Ehrman correctly: what he actually says is as follows: 'In any event, none of them [*i.e. the autographs*] now survive... no two of these copies are exactly alike in all their particulars. No one knows how many differences or variant readings occur among the surviving witnesses...'<sup>22</sup> It needs to be emphasised that Christians believe in the inspiration of the *text* of the Bible, not the ink or parchments! Thus, in this respect, it is largely irrelevant that we no longer have the autographs.

Moreover, it should be noted that the authors of *Before Nicea* recognise that essentially the same factors are true of the Qur'an—that Muslims do not possess anything other than 'copies' of the original: 'Most of the early original Qur'aan manuscripts with us now date from after the 2nd century.'<sup>23</sup> The autographs of the Qur'an no longer exist because the third Caliph, 'Uthman, responding to a crisis, 'after consultation with other companions, united the Muslims under one reading which was the Quraysh that the Prophet himself had used... all other dialects of reading and writing were ordered to be destroyed'.<sup>24</sup>

Since *Before Nicea* does not consider it to be problematic that all extant manuscripts of the Qur'an are 'copies' why, in the eyes of the book's authors, is it such a problem for the Bible? *Before Nicea* ignores Ehrman's subsequent comment about what he calls 'textual variants': 'By far the vast majority are purely "accidental," readily explained as resulting from scribal ineptitude, carelessness, or fatigue.'<sup>25</sup> This must be emphasised to Muslims.

### III The Identity of the Earliest Christians

The Qur'an presents Jesus as a Prophet of Islam, and his earliest followers—what the Qur'an calls his 'helpers'—as Muslims.<sup>26</sup> The problem for Islam is, history does not agree! Recently, works such as *Before Nicea* have identified the Ebionites, a sect which denied the deity of Christ and repudiated Paul as an apostle, as the earliest Christians: 'The Unitarian concept of God and the prophetic human nature of Jesus, was held by many early communities, basing their way of life on the teachings of Jesus, such as the *Ebionites*...'<sup>27</sup>

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25 Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*, 27.

26 Surah 61: 14. O ye who believe! Be ye helpers of Allah: As said Jesus the son of Mary to the Disciples, "Who will be my helpers to (the work of) Allah?" Said the disciples, "We are Allah's helpers!" then a portion of the Children of Israel believed, and a portion disbelieved: But We gave power to those who believed, against their enemies, and they became the ones that prevailed.

27 *Before Nicea*, 18.

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21 *Before Nicea*, 37; Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

22 Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*, 27.

23 *Before Nicea*, 58.

24 *Before Nicea*, 56-57.

The evidence for this assertion? John Toland (1670-1722), a sceptical Ulster writer who was even in his own age regarded as a maverick rather than a true scholar. Metzger notes the reaction to Toland's dubious fantasies about the New Testament canon:

Toland's arguments and innuendoes at once drew forth replies from defenders of the faith, including Samuel Clarke, rector of St James, Westminster, Stephen Nye, rector of Little Hormead, Herts., and John Richardson, formerly Fellow of Emmanuel College, Cambridge. The argument of Richardson was based on the reasonable premiss that 'what the Apostles Wrote, and what they Authoriz'd, can be known in no other way than by the Testimonies of those who liv'd at the same with them, and the Tradition of those who succeeded them'. It should not, therefore, be thought surprising, Richardson continued, 'if some Books were sooner and some later receiv'd as Canonical, by the Universal Body of Christians in all Places, because either the Books themselves, or the Testimonials to prove them Apostolical, might, nay Naturally would, be transmitted to some Churches later than others, as they were Situated nearer to, or remov'd farther from, those Cities or Countrys where they were first Publish'd, or enjoy'd a greater or less intercourse with them'.<sup>28</sup>

None of this, of course, receives any attention from Muslim propagandists. In a modern Islamic propagandistic work by Muhammad 'Ata ur-Rahim, *Jesus Prophet of Islam*, we find Toland's work *Nazarenus* quoted on the Ebionites:

Since the Nazarenes, or Ebionites, are by all the Church historians unanimously acknowledged to have been the first Christians, or those who believed in Christ among the Jews... considering this, I say how was it possible for them to be the first of all others (for they were made to be the first heretics), who should form wrong conceptions of the doctrines and designs of Jesus? And how came the Gentiles who believed in him after his death from the preaching of persons that never knew him to have truer notions these things, or whence could they have their information but from the believing Jews?<sup>29</sup>

Immediately we can see several problems in Toland's claims which are presented here as authoritative evidence. Firstly, he too easily equates the Nazarenes with the Ebionites, whereas the learned Jean Daniélou emphasised that the Ebionites should not be confused with the Nazarenes.<sup>30</sup> Secondly, Toland equates the Ebionites with the earliest Christian Jews,

<sup>28</sup> Bruce Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origins, Development and Significance*, (Oxford: OUP, 1987, 1997), 12-13.

<sup>29</sup> Muhammad 'Ata ur-Rahim, *Jesus Prophet of Islam*, (Elmhurst, New York: Tahrike Tar-sile Qur'an Inc., First U.S. Edition 1991), 76.

<sup>30</sup> Jean Daniélou, *The Theology of Jewish Christianity*, (London & Philadelphia: Darton, Longman & Todd/The Westminster Press, 1964, trans. Baker, James A.), 56.

which again is simply not valid. Obviously, the earliest Christians were Jews, but it simply does not follow that they held the same views as the Ebionites, and Toland never demonstrates that this was the case.

Thirdly, without providing any supporting evidence, he asserts that all church historians 'unanimously' acknowledge the Ebionites to have been the first Christians. Moreover, the 'father' of Church History was Eusebius, who had a very dismissive attitude to the Ebionites, and certainly did not equate them with the earliest Christians: 'The ancients quite properly called these men Ebionites, because they held poor and mean opinions concerning Christ.'<sup>31</sup> One fails to see how Toland could have missed this, and the only conclusion that one can reach is that he deliberately ignored this evidence because it contradicted his assertions. There exists no definite information regarding the Ebionites *before* 180 A.D.—so how could they be the earliest Christians?

Finally, Toland asserts that the 'wrong' views about Christ, by which he presumably means belief in his deity, were the result of later Gentile influence, for which again Toland provides no supporting evidence. It also ignores the New Testament record, such as the references in the Gospel of John, who we should remember was both one of the earliest Christians and also a Jew rather than Gentile, who affirmed the deity of Christ (e.g. John 1:1; 8:58).

#### IV The Apostle Paul—the *bête noir* of Islamic polemics

If Jesus was a Muslim, who taught Islam, then why does the New Testament *not* teach this? Obviously, according to Islamic logic, someone changed the message. The question is 'who?' Islamic soteriology holds to salvation through belief and works, as displayed by the great Scale that will be used to weigh deeds on the Day of Judgment, Surah As-Shura 42:17 ('Allah it is Who hath revealed the Scripture with truth, and the Balance'), as recorded in the Hadith:

Narrated by AbudDarda'

Mishkat Al-Masabih 0626(R)

The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: Nothing is weightier in the scales of a believer on the Day of Judgment than his good behaviour...

*Transmitted by Tirmidhi.*

Since the apostle Paul taught justification by faith apart from works of the law, he has become the person Muslim polemicists blame for changing the *kerygma* of Jesus. Kadhi quotes Arnold Meyer's 1909 book, *Jesus or Paul*:<sup>32</sup>

Dr. Arnold Meyer says: "*If by Christianity we understand faith in Christ as the heavenly Son of God, who did not belong to earthly humanity, but who lived in the divine likeness and glory, who came down from heaven to earth, who entered humanity and took upon himself a human form through a virgin, that he might*

<sup>31</sup> Eusebius, *Church History*, Book III, Chapter XXVII.

<sup>32</sup> Arnold Meyer, *Jesus or Paul*, (London & New York: Harper & Brothers, 1909, trans. J. R. Wilkinson), 122-123.

*make propitiation for men's sins by his own blood upon the cross, who was then awakened from death and raised to the right hand of God, as the Lord of his own people, who believe in him, who hears their prayers, guards and leads them, who will come again with the clouds of heaven to judge the world, who will cast down all the foes of God, and will bring his own people with him unto the home of heavenly light so that they may become like His glorified body—if this is Christianity, then such Christianity was founded by St. Paul and not by our Lord"*

Dr. Arnold Meyer, Professor of Theology, Zurich University, *Jesus or Paul*, p. 122.<sup>33</sup>

What Kadhi did not quote was what Meyer immediately added:

Yet whatever view we take, whether we regard this form of Christianity as of the real essence of Christianity or not, in any case we are far from being justified in speaking, without qualification, of St. Paul as the founder of Christianity. For in the first place the conceptions here employed were neither all created by St. Paul, nor was he the first to apply all of them to Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>34</sup>

It becomes very clear from Meyer's book that he proceeds on the basis of outdated German nineteenth/early twentieth century liberalism, which is not representative of contemporary scholarship:

Adopting this order of investigation we also make it clear from the very beginning that in the Christ of the first three gospels we are dealing not with the historical Jesus, but with the conception formed of Him by the faith and in the tradition of the Primitive Community, a conception which must have been influenced by St. Paul, seeing that it was created after his times.<sup>35</sup>

In fact, in the light of early Christian tradition Paul's Christology was influenced 'by the faith and in the tradition of the Primitive Community', rather than *vice versa*!

This is the vital area neglected by Islamic polemicists—the issue of *Pre-Pauline Tradition*. If Paul *were* the innovator of canonical Christianity, diverting it from what Jesus and his immediate disciples actually taught, we should *not* find him utilising *early*—and thus *prior*—Christian tradition in his writings, since this would undermine his supposed goal. Yet the fact is that he does indeed cite such earlier Christian tradition! N.T. Wright observes that in regard to 1 Corinthians 15:1-3, the references to what Paul 'received' definitely indicate a prior tradition: '*paredoka* and *parelabon* (v.3, the latter echoing *parelabete* in v.1) are technical for the receiving and handing on of tradition.'<sup>36</sup>

This applies to the death and resurrection of Christ in 1 Corinthians 15:1-5. It also applies to the divine sonship of Jesus, which Islam specifically

33 Kadhi, *What Did Jesus Really Say?*, <http://media.isnet.org/off/Islam/JesusSay/ch1.2.7.html>

34 Meyer, *Jesus or Paul*, 123.

35 Meyer, *Jesus or Paul*, 12.

36 N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, (London: SPCK, 2003), 319n.

denies. Kramer observes that 'A pre-Pauline formula which represents an early setting of the title *Son* is found at Rom. 1.3b-4'.<sup>37</sup> When we consider the pre-Pauline use of 'Lord' we also see that Paul did not innovate the understanding of this title held by the earliest Christians, as demonstrated by the pre-Pauline formulae in Romans 10:9—'that if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord...'<sup>38</sup> Bruce comments that Paul learned the outline of his message 'in one of the churches with which he had fellowship in his earlier Christian days, such as Damascus or Antioch'.<sup>39</sup> Thus, Paul did not *manufacture* a new faith: he *received* the essential beliefs from the earliest Christian believers, which undermines any idea of his being the real founder of Christianity.

Had Paul been distorting the gospel message, the earliest disciples of Jesus—specifically the apostles—would have confronted him and opposed his message, yet we read in Galatians 2:8-9 that the other apostles, including John, *recognised* the apostleship of Paul. It should be remembered that these 'pillars' were still alive at the time that Paul penned this epistle, so if he had been uttering a falsehood, they would have repudiated his claims to recognition of his apostleship, but there are no such statements in any first century writing ascribed to James, Peter or John.

The message of *Acts*, especially chapters 9-13, and 2 Peter 3:15-16 also demonstrate acceptance of Paul's apostolate by the original apostles. In 1 Corinthians 15, the earlier Christian material that Paul utilises also refers to the risen Jesus appearing to Peter and the Twelve, and then to more than 'five hundred' people. Again, if Paul's message was so contrary to that of the earliest disciples of Jesus, why should he make references to these people, most of whom were still alive (v6), who could easily have refuted his message, if it indeed contradicted the original *kerygma*?

There is further indication that Paul's message was in keeping with the original gospel. It should be observed that Paul wrote his epistle to the Romans around 57 A.D. We must note that Paul is writing to a congregation that he did *not* found, and that he refers to the Jewish-Christian apostles 'Andronicus and Junias, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners, who are outstanding among the apostles, *who also were in Christ before me*', Romans 16:7. Since it is likely that Paul was converted within a year or so of the crucifixion-resurrection event, the two individuals must have been among the earliest converts to Christianity. This is an important point to raise with Muslim propagandists.

Given that the church at Rome was not of Pauline foundation, its theological beliefs did not originate with the apostle Paul. Had Paul's gospel been contrary to the original gospel of Jesus, earlier Christian believers such as Andronicus and Junias—described as 'apostles' no less—would have contested it. Yet it is clear from the Epistle of Clement, which was actually an epis-

37 Werner Kramer, *Christ, Lord, Son of God*, (London: SCM, 1966), 108.

38 Kramer, *Christ, Lord, Son of God*, 65.

39 F. F. Bruce, *Paul & Jesus*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974), 45.

tle written by the church at Rome to the Corinthians, c. 95, that Paul was highly esteemed in the Empire's capital:

Even the greatest and most virtuous pillars of our Church were assailed by envy and jealousy, and had to keep up the struggle till death ended their days. Look at the holy Apostles... And Paul, because of jealousy and contention, has become the very type of endurance rewarded. He was in bonds seven times, he was exiled, and he was stoned. He preached in the East and in the West, winning a noble reputation for his faith. He taught righteousness to all the world; and after reaching the furthest limits of the West, and bearing his testimony before kings and rulers, he passed out of this world and was received into the holy places. In him we have one of the greatest of all examples of endurance.<sup>40</sup>

In chapter 47, the epistle obviously refers to Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians, and designates Paul as 'the blessed Apostle Paul'.<sup>41</sup> Hence, it must be the case that Paul's gospel, as outlined in the Epistle, concerning the divinity of Jesus, his redemptive death and his resurrection, and also the means of salvation (by grace through faith alone on the basis of Jesus' crucified self-sacrifice) was in fact the *same*

message preached from the start by the other disciples. The reality of Paul's references to early Christian tradition and the apostolic recognition of Paul's calling, as also testified by the Epistle of Clement, totally undermines Islamic polemics on this issue.

## V Constantine and the Council of Nicaea

Islamic polemics have another *bête noir*—the Emperor Constantine. This is because Muslim propagandists need to be able to identify someone who had the political clout to enforce uniformity in the church, and to exclude, even persecute those who rejected the Trinity, and other such matters. Obviously, it is under Constantine that Christians first enjoyed political power. Moreover, it is often the case that Muslims assume that the features of their history are replicated in those who came before them, especially given their belief in the collegiality of the Prophets. So, if something happened in Islamic history, the likelihood is that it also occurred in Christian history.

This is especially true of sacred texts. The history of the Qur'anic text shows that it was recognised through a kind of committee under Zaid ibn Thabit, under the orders of Caliph 'Uthman, who then secured uniformity by calling in, and then burning all existing texts, as recorded in the Hadith:

Sahih Al-Bukhari Hadith 6.510  
Narrated by Anas bin Malik

... 'Uthman then ordered Zaid bin Thabit... to rewrite the manuscripts in perfect copies... 'Uthman sent to every Muslim province one copy of what they had copied, and

<sup>40</sup> Clement of Rome, 'First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians', Chapter 5, Maxwell Staniforth (trans.), *Early Christian Writings: The Apostolic Fathers*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 25-26.

<sup>41</sup> Clement of Rome, 'First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians', 48.

ordered that all the other Qur'anic materials, whether written in fragmentary manuscripts or whole copies, be burnt...

This becomes relevant when we look at what *Jesus Prophet of Islam* claims happened at the Council of Nicaea at the orders of Constantine:

...it was decided to resort to a miracle of God to affirm and support the decision of the Council: the pile of the Gospels... still lay in the middle of the hall where they had been placed at the beginning of the Council. According to one source, there were at least 270 versions of the Gospel at this time, while another states there were as many as 4,000 different Gospels...

It was decided that all the different Gospels should be placed under a table in the Council Hall. Everyone then left the room and the door was locked. The bishops were asked to pray... that the correct version of the Gospel might come onto the top of the table. In the morning the Gospels acceptable to Athanasius... were found neatly placed on top of the table. It was decided that all the Gospels remaining under the table should be burned... It became a capital offence to possess an unauthorised Gospel.<sup>42</sup>

Readers will recognise that *The Da Vinci Code* made similar allegations. All of this is pure fantasy, and it is significant that *Jesus Prophet of Islam* gives no citation for its assertions, and

even more significant that it never names the two sources it 'quotes' about the number of the 'gospels' supposedly on offer at the Council. In terms of what happened at Nicaea, the only contemporary sources we possess are those of Athanasius and Eusebius, who both attended the Council, and that of Eustathius, another attendee who was hostile to Eusebius and whose work is found in Theodoret's *Church History*. None of the claims made by Islamic polemics is supported in their accounts. Yet this is a common feature of Muslim propaganda. The danger is that few ordinary Christians know much about either the Council or about the Canonical process, and so are easy meat for such propaganda.

### Arius and canonical criteria in relation to Islam and Christianity

The Arian controversy did not concern canonical issues; Arius himself had the same canon of Scripture as his adversaries: 'Arius was by profession an interpreter of the Scriptures'.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, 'Arius and his supporters were interested in a large number of texts, from Old and New Testaments alike'.<sup>44</sup> These included Romans 11:36.<sup>45</sup> The last-mentioned is important because *Jesus Prophet of Islam* makes some ridiculous and false assertions about Arius: 'He followed the teaching of Jesus implicitly, and refused to accept

<sup>42</sup> ur-Rahim, *Jesus Prophet of Islam*., 103-104.

<sup>43</sup> Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, (London: SCM Press, 2001 second edition), 107.

<sup>44</sup> Williams, *Arius*, 108.

<sup>45</sup> Williams, *Arius*, 271.

the innovations introduced by Paul.<sup>46</sup> The problem is that Muslim propagandists are arguing that the New Testament canon was arbitrarily chosen, rejecting works such as the *Gospel of Thomas* and other documents. The average Christian has little knowledge of canonical issues, and so is unable to respond.

The main criterion was *Apostolicity*—the apostles were commissioned by Jesus, and what they and close associates wrote became recognised—not chosen as Scripture. In his *Dialogue with Trypho* 103.8, Justin Martyr (c. 150) refers to ‘the memoirs composed by the apostles and those who followed them’, and in *1 Apology* 66, he identifies those memoirs with the Gospels: ‘For the apostles, in the memoirs composed by them, which are called Gospels...’

Linked to this was another feature—that any such writings had to emerge in the apostolic era, i.e. the first century. So works such as *Pseudo-Thomas*, etc., were rejected. Another factor was the criterion of *Antiquity*—a text had to go back to the Apostolic Age, which is why Irenaeus (c. 180) rejected the Valentinian Gnostic work, *The Gospel of Truth*, because it was ‘recent’.<sup>47</sup>

Islam authenticates its Hadith corpus through the process of *Isnad*, the chain of narration. Similarly, the early church insisted upon *Traditional Usage* going back to apostolic days as a criterion; for example, Jerome (*Letter*

*CXXIX to Dardanus*) observed that the *Epistle to the Hebrews* ‘receives recognition day by day in the churches’ public reading’. Another Islamic criterion is *ijma*, consensus. Eusebius shows that the early church had a similar concept—*Catholicity*—in recognising genuine Scriptures: ‘The so-called Acts of Peter, however, and the Gospel which bears his name, and the Preaching and the Apocalypse, as they are called, we know have not been universally accepted...’<sup>48</sup> Note the reference here to ‘universal acceptance’. There were also the criteria of *Orthodoxy* and *Inspiration*, but the analogies of the preceding criteria with Islamic concepts provide a means to answer Muslim propagandists on the Canon.

## VI Constantine a Pagan

Like *The Da Vinci Code*, Islamic polemical literature claims that Constantine was a life-long pagan, and so his alleged conversion was actually a politically-motivated conspiracy aimed at the paganising of Christianity. *Before Nicea* proposes a similar idea:

Remember, these same Romans would later preside over the *Council of Nicea*, headed by the Pagan Roman Emperor, Constantine, who was himself considered to be an incarnation and embodiment of the sun god!! *The Council of Nicea* and other ‘councils’ lead to the ‘official’ and ‘orthodox’ doctrines of which books should be placed into the Bible, the trinity and Jesus’ date of

<sup>46</sup> ur-Rahim, *Jesus Prophet of Islam*, 81.

<sup>47</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book III, Chapter XI.

<sup>48</sup> Eusebius, *Church History*, Book III, Chapter III.



birth being fixed to the 25th of December.<sup>49</sup>

In fact, there was no political mileage in conversion to Christianity. 'At the time of Constantine's conversion (312) Christians made up a small minority of the empire's population, say 10 per cent, although that is only a guess.'<sup>50</sup> Constantine's genuine conversion is confirmed by Christian writers who knew him, such as Lactantius and Eusebius.<sup>51</sup> It is corroborated by hostile pagan writers such as Zosimus, and by Constantine's relative, Julian the Apostate, in his work *The Caesars*.<sup>52</sup>

Constantine's correspondence, policies and funerary arrangements testify that he thought of himself as a Christian. For example, in a letter to the Eastern provinces, he refers to the Great Persecution under Diocletian and Maximian being the result of the oracle of Apollo declaring that 'the righteous men on earth were a bar to his speaking the truth', the 'righteous' being identified with the Christians, hence their persecution. Constantine goes on to refer to this 'impious deliverance of the Pythian oracle' which 'exercised a delusive power' over the persecuting Emperors.<sup>53</sup> His policy in founding Con-

stantinople as a Christian city free from paganism was lauded by the church historian Sozomen:

As this city became the capital of the empire during the period of religious prosperity, it was not polluted by altars, Grecian temples, nor sacrifices... Constantine further honored this newly compacted city of Christ, named after himself, by adorning it with numerous and magnificent houses of prayer.<sup>54</sup>

It follows that Constantine was not a pagan, and so was not involved in 'paganising' Christianity.

## VIII Response of Christians

### 1. Learn about Islam

It is essential that Christians learn about Islam. The apostle Paul evidently possessed knowledge of Hellenistic religion and philosophy, as his debates with Epicureans and Stoics on the Areopagus reveal, Acts 17. Hence, he was able to present the gospel in terms that his hearers could understand. It follows that in order to adequately answer Muslim polemicists, we must know something about Islam. Usually, Christian experts are available to provide such education.

### 2. Learn about Islamic Polemics

In order to answer Islamic polemics, we must be aware of the main or favourite *issues* raised by anti-Christian Muslim propaganda. So often, it is

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49 Before Nicea, 47.

50 Cyril Mango, 'New Religion, Old Culture', *The Oxford History of Byzantium*, Ed. Cyril Mango, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 96.

51 Lactantius, *Of the Manner in Which the Persecutors Died*, Chapter XLIV, ANF 07; Eusebius, *The Life of the Blessed Emperor Constantine*, Chapter XXVII, NPNF 201.

52 Zosimus, *The History of Count Zosimus*, (London: Green and Chaplin, 1814). Book II.

53 Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, Chapters XLVIII-LXI.

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54 Sozomen, *Church History*, Book II, Chapter III, NPNF 202.

because Christians are not prepared that they are stumped when encountering such arguments for the first time. Training sessions should be held on these issues, inviting people experienced in answering such propaganda.

### 3. Learn about Christian history and doctrine

If congregations are not given adequate training in the foundations of the Faith, they become like the 'unoccupied' abode of Matthew 12:44 to which a demon may return—that is, people who are not prepared are open season for hostile polemicists. Most congregational activities involve devotional or ethical issues, and unfortunately, anything involving intellectual matters is seen as daunting or boring.

Yet it is impossible to answer Islamic polemics without some sustained training programme addressing matters such as biblical canonicity, the Trinity, the person of Christ, the Council of Nicaea, Paul in relation to Jesus, and other such matters—all issues which are raised by Muslims. Pastors need to give congregations a sense of urgency about these matters, pointing

out that they—and certainly their children—will encounter Islamic polemics, especially in colleges and universities, as well as—increasingly—in Muslim street outreaches, a common sight in places like London. If Christians want to safeguard their children's spiritual future, some intellectual effort is necessary—even about obscure figures such as Victor Tununensis!

There is historical precedent. The great Puritan, Richard Baxter was famous for catechising his parishioners. Instructed in the intellectual defence of the gospel, many ordinary believers were very able to defend the Faith to 'everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you' (1 Peter 3:15). Indeed, if we go back much further in church history, the second and third centuries saw the emergence of able Christian 'Apolo-gists' such as Justin Martyr and Tertullian who defended the Faith against attacks by non-Christians. The rise of Islamic polemics in the West demands that congregations as a whole need to learn about the main issues in Muslim propaganda, and crucially, how to answer them.