

# Evangelical Review of Theology

GENERAL EDITOR: THOMAS SCHIRRMACHER

Volume 36 · Number 4 · October 2012

Articles and book reviews reflecting global evangelical  
theology for the purpose of discerning the obedience of faith

Published by



for  
WORLD EVANGELICAL  
ALLIANCE  
Theological Commission

# Teaching Patristics for Muslim Students

Wendy Elgersma Helleman

**KEYWORDS:** *Early Christianity, Religious Studies, Trinity, suffering, incarnation, Arius, ecumenical councils, translation, Sufism*

THIS PAPER FOCUSES on the specific issues which arise when Patristics, or Early Christianity (including the seven ecumenical councils) is taught to students in Nigeria coming from a Muslim background. Much of the terminology which is familiar to Christian students needs elaboration, but Muslim students have difficulty understanding the deity or Sonship of Christ, his suffering and crucifixion, the Trinity, and the development of the biblical canon. The course is helpful in making them aware that these issues were discussed at length, and settled before Islam arose.

## I Federal University of Jos, Nigeria

The University of Jos is located in Jos, and thus situated in the Middle Belt, and sandwiched between the largely Muslim (Hausa and Fulani) North and

the Christian (Igbo and Yoruba) South. Known for tin mining, Jos attracted Hausa settlers from the North at the turn of the century (1900). The city is about 60-70 per cent Christian, and 30-40 per cent Muslim; the area of northern Jos where the university is located is predominantly Muslim.

As a city, Jos was relatively peaceful until September 2001, when serious riots broke out, just before the September 11 crisis in New York; there were problems once again in May 2002, with voter registration in Jos North. Since then some serious riots occurred at the end of November 2008, in January-March 2010, once again in December 2010, and indeed throughout the last two years.

Although these problems have a significant ethnic and political component, the religious nature of the context cannot be ignored; Nigeria is not 'secular' in the western sense of the term, nor are the universities truly secular in nature, so the simmering crisis is an indication of the need for the respective parties to sit down together and dialogue. Leaders on both sides

---

**Wendy Helleman** (MA Classical Language University of Toronto, PhD early Christian philosophy, Free University of Amsterdam) taught in Religious Studies at the University of Jos from 2002-2008, and continues to supervise graduate students there, while also helping to set up a department of Christian Studies and teaching at the University of the Gambia. This work is sponsored by the Christian Studies International, the Canadian branch of the International Institute for Christian Studies (based in Kansas City).

have recognized the potential role of the university, and particularly the department of Religious Studies, to act as a vital link in discussion between the respective communities, if not also beyond that sphere in the larger community.

Most universities in Nigeria are located in what are more clearly either predominantly Christian or predominantly Muslim states, and the teaching of Religious Studies at respective universities will reflect that context. The University of Jos is special because both major religious groups are well represented in the department, more or less in proportion to the religious divide in the city, with one-third Muslim and two-thirds Christians on faculty. Indeed, for many years it was the policy of the university department to encourage good relationships. Accordingly, all Muslim students are required to take some basic courses in Christianity, while all Christian students take some basic courses in Islam. The intent is to foster communication, dialogue and better relationships.

In spite of ongoing tension we recognize that, philosophically speaking, Christians have much in common with Islam. Both religions are theistic, both are 'religions of the book', both respect God's law, as the manifestation of his will for human life, and both affirm the sovereignty of God as highly exalted over creatures. Unlike other far Eastern religions, neither is pantheistic.

## II The Course in Early Christianity

Implementation of such a general policy resulted in the requirement that all students enrolled in Religious Studies

at the University of Jos take the basic course on Early Christianity. The course is taught every year to first year students in any one of the three major sections, *Religious Studies* as such, *Christian Religious Studies*, and *Islamic Studies and Arabic*. Since all students in the department take the course, enrolment invariably includes both Muslim and Christian students. The class typically has from 25 to 40 students.

Together with University of Jos colleague Professor Musa Gaiya, the author taught this course during the years spent in Nigeria (2002-2008). At present we are collaborating in writing a new textbook for the study of early Christianity by African students, and doing so with an eye to the needs of students who are taking the course at universities like that in Jos.<sup>1</sup>

In preparing this text we recognize that, even as the faculty in the department of Religious Studies is actively working toward goals of inter-religious understanding, there is room for improvement. Preconceptions on the part of both Muslim and Christian students get in the way. One can find a regrettably negative attitude among Christian students towards Muslim students because these are typically not as well prepared for university work when they have graduated from Qur'anic schools, or entered under a quota system. Muslim students also come with preconceived ideas about Christians and Christianity. Some of these ideas are rooted in the specific background which they bring to these studies, for

---

<sup>1</sup> The author expresses thanks to Professor Gaiya for his reading of this paper and contribution of a number of perceptive comments.

the schools attended by these students focus on Arabic language and literature, and memorization of the Qur'an.

### III Specific Problems

#### 1 The Trinity, and Sonship of Jesus Christ

The central issues of the early centuries of Christianity introduce all the students to what is essentially foreign terrain. Yet Christian students have a distinct advantage in the course, because there are many central concepts and events in the history of salvation (like sin, the incarnation, or resurrection) which need little detailed elaboration for them. Muslim students, however, do need thorough explanation of these matters. The Qur'an explicitly rejects the trinitarian nature of God, and also the sonship of Christ, as Son of God. Just as Judaism takes the *Shema* as fundamental: 'Hear O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one' (Deut. 4.6), Islam has the *Shahada*: 'There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet'.

Presentation of the seven ecumenical councils of early Christianity poses a specific difficulty for both Christian and Islamic students, particularly because the issues raised at these councils involve considerable use of relevant philosophical terminology current in the ancient world. This presents a specific obstacle for almost any student in Nigeria for, with the exception of a few universities like Ibadan, Lagos and Maiduguri, little philosophy is taught, aside from the training for the Catholic priesthood.

Yet these early ecumenical councils

are of considerable interest for introducing the issue of authority in the church. Furthermore, this question interests Islamic students because it is certainly also an issue in modern Islam: Who speaks for Islam? On what basis does the *imam* exercise authority over his audience? How are issues decided, and differences settled?

#### 2 Who is Jesus?

The question of the identity of Jesus, strictly speaking, does not belong in the course on Early Christianity. However, it needs considerable attention because of the specific background which students bring to the course. Discussion of the person of Jesus as both human and divine is needed for an understanding of the challenge of Gnosticism, since it tended to underestimate the reality of his humanity, and also the reality of his suffering, death and resurrection. As the fourth century bishop Ambrose expressed it in his treatise on the Incarnation:

The faith of the Church is that Christ is the Son of God, eternally from the Father, and born of the Virgin... He has a divine and a human nature, but is one in both. He is not one person from the Father, and another from the Virgin, but the same person, one way from the Father, and another way from the Virgin. ... He truly suffered in the body according to its nature, but the nature of the Word was not affected by the suffering of the body. Because our resurrection is real, the reality of Christ's suffering is preached.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Citation of Ambrose, *De incarnationis dominicae sacramento* [On the sacrament

Regarding Jesus as *prophet*, the Qur'an bestows great honour him, accepting his special birth, sinlessness, miracles, ascent to heaven, and return in judgement. Indeed, Islam acknowledges characteristics of Jesus which it does not ascribe to Muhammad. Mary too is highly respected as mother of Jesus. The birth of Jesus is recognized as miraculous, and the conception through divine inspiration 'of Our own spirit'.<sup>3</sup> The account clearly assigns a role for a 'holy spirit', breathed in at conception.

### 3 Jesus as Messiah and Saviour

Jesus is referred to as 'Word of Allah' a number of times in the Qur'an, and also a messenger from God; the term *al-Masih* is probably a derivative of the Hebrew for Messiah: *Christos*, the anointed one.<sup>4</sup> Jesus is also recognized for a mediating role, for he is described as 'close to Allah': as son of Mary, an outstanding personality in this world and in the hereafter, and one of those 'brought near'.<sup>5</sup>

Jesus was a king, but a king riding

on a donkey, and thus no direct threat to the Herods or Roman governor. His style of leadership as king differs profoundly from that of Muhammad, who was both a military and civilian ruler in Medina. However, the concept of Jesus as the *Messiah*, the anointed one, whose coming was anticipated by a long history of OT prophecy,<sup>6</sup> and is thus a fulfilment of promise, is not the real problem.

### 4 Jesus' suffering and the cross

More difficult is the nature of the crucifixion. Denying Jesus' actual suffering as a false notion, the Qur'an teaches that Jesus *appeared* to have died on the cross. The report of his death is said to reflect boasting of Jews.<sup>7</sup> Such an interpretation of Jesus' suffering was already given in the second century among Gnostics who claimed that Jesus only appeared to have a body and be human; they said he was actually a phantom and, as such, did not really suffer and die. His suffering and crucifixion were attributed to Simon the Cyrene.<sup>8</sup>

Such interpretations were anticipated by Docetists who could not accept Jesus as fully bodily and material, and thus living a human life, limited by his humanity and mortality, suffering and

---

of the incarnation of our Lord] 5, from the translation of J. Kenny, at 'Muslims Query Christian Beliefs; What do the Fathers of the Church Say about them?' < [www.josephkenny.joyeurs.com/Query.htm](http://www.josephkenny.joyeurs.com/Query.htm). > accessed 20 Feb 2012.

3 The Qur'an Sura 21 (The Prophets):91; Sura 2 (The Cow):253. Citations from the Qur'an are based on *The Holy Qur'an with English Translation*, N. Uzunoglu, T. R. Topuzoglu, A. Ozek, M. Maksudoglu, trans. 6th ed. (Istanbul: Ilmi Nesriyat, 2000).

4 The Qur'an Sura 4 (The Women):170-171; Sura 2 (The Cow):253; Sura 3 (The Family of Imran):49.

5 The Qur'an Sura 3 (The Family of Imran):44.

---

6 Jn. 4:24-25; Mt. 26:64.

7 The Qur'an Sura 4 (The Women):157.

8 This is the view reported by Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.24.4, for the second century Gnostic, Basileides. The quote is also given in J. Stevenson, *A New Eusebius. Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to AD 337*. W.H.C. Frend rev. (London: SPCK. 1987), 96-97.

dying.<sup>9</sup> If he is divine, how could he suffer? If he is truly to be worshipped as Lord (*kurios*), he should be more powerful, and immortal. These early sectors in Christianity wanted to regard Jesus as having the immaterial and incorruptible character of spirit or soul, and as such, not subject to dissolution or decay.

Christianity, on the other hand, teaches that only a divine person can accomplish what Jesus did; as true God he was pure and sinless, and was able to overcome death by the working of God's Holy Spirit in him. But the reason for his coming as a human being was precisely that he would suffer on behalf of fallen humanity. So it was important that Jesus also be truly human, and that he take on our frail humanity, our sin, and death. As Cyril of Alexandria (AD 376-444) explains in a letter:

Rather we follow the faith of the sacred Scripture and the pronouncements of the saints in maintaining that the Word became flesh, as we have explained in many places. He also laid down his life for us, since his death was to save the world. He underwent the cross, despising the shame, even though he was life itself by nature, as God.<sup>10</sup>

Denial of the cross is a denial of the impact of human sin and failure to live up to what God intended for his creation. Is it possible to truly please God

without the divine mediation of the cross? Rejection of the crucifixion ultimately reflects an unrealistically optimistic understanding of humanity.

### 5 Jesus' Sonship and the Fatherhood of God

Muslim students have great difficulty with the Christian belief that Jesus is both truly human and truly divine; how can the creature be joined to the Creator? they ask. It is like a slave becoming a lord. So they do not accept the incarnation: 'God cannot have a son'. To speak of God thus is to attribute creaturely life to the Creator, which they consider blasphemous.<sup>11</sup> This is why the course needs to pay some attention to the scriptural evidence for Jesus' Sonship; although strictly speaking this does not belong to this course, acquaintance with the New Testament cannot be assumed.

Islamic understanding of the incarnation typically assumes Jesus as God's son on a human analogy (God as father and Mary as mother). It asks, can Allah have a son without consort?<sup>12</sup> Attributing fatherhood to Allah may be thought to imply that God is incomplete without his son, since he becomes a 'father' with the birth of a son.

This is also the reason why Muslim students more readily accept the approach of 'adoptionism' (also called 'dynamic monarchianism') as a subordinationist answer to the charge of 'two Gods'; this approach depicts Jesus as 'subordinate' to the Father, as a son by adoption, not by nature. Adop-

9 See Stevenson, *A New Eusebius*, 14-15, on the letter of the Apostolic Father Ignatius asking why he is now in chains if indeed Christ only 'appeared' to have suffered?

10 Cyril's *Letter* 1, par. 10, as translated by J. Kenny, at 'Muslims Query Christian Beliefs' <[www.josephkenny.joyeurs.com/Query.htm](http://www.josephkenny.joyeurs.com/Query.htm)> accessed 20 February 2012.

11 The Qur'an Sura 19 (Mary):35.

12 The Qur'an Sura 6 (Cattle):100-101.

tionism thus affirmed divine unity by representing God as sole divine ruler (*monos archon*, the root of 'monarchianism'), and assigning an inferior role to Jesus as his Son.<sup>13</sup> Unlike Logos theology, which was also subordinationist as it focused on Jesus as 'Word' of God (*Logos* means 'word', or 'expression'),<sup>14</sup> monarchianism would be rejected by local church councils.

Adoptionism stressed the *human* character of Jesus, born miraculously of the Virgin Mary, later becoming the Son of God when the Spirit (as the 'Christ') came upon him at baptism. Throughout his earthly life Jesus learned obedience, and by suffering he overcame the sin inherited from Adam. Jesus was Son of God not by nature, but by adoption and through merit.

This position was first associated clearly with Theodotus (in Rome ca. 190 AD), who was also excommunicated for holding it (ca. 195). Seventy years later Paul of Samosata (Bishop of Antioch, 260-272) taught a similar position: the *Logos* of God dwelt in Jesus, as it dwelt in all the prophets from Moses, but in greater measure, making for closer union with the Fa-

ther God. Through a relationship of love God 'adopted' Jesus as Son after his crucifixion and resurrection, and bestowed deity on him as a reward for his efforts.<sup>15</sup> After lengthy discussion the synod of Antioch (269) also condemned and excommunicated Paul of Samosata; he nonetheless influenced numerous followers, among them Lucian of Antioch (d. 312), who in turn influenced Arius of Alexandria.<sup>16</sup>

Like Adoptionists, Arius reflects concern for the unity of God the Father, as essentially unknowable and unbegotten, far removed from all creatures; the Son had a beginning in time: 'there was a time when he was not'. God created his *Logos* in order thereby to create the world, and to mediate between himself as 'unbegotten' and the creation as 'made'. The *Logos* was therefore the first and highest of all created beings, and might even be called God, but was still a creature.

We see this from statements about the Arians in an encyclical letter of bishop Alexander of Alexandria (319 AD):

The dogmas they have invented and assert, contrary to the Scriptures, are these: That God was not always the Father, but that there was a period when he was not the Father; and that the Word of God was not from eternity, but was made out of nothing. The ever-existing God, the 'I AM', and the eternal One, made him

<sup>13</sup> On adoptionism and monarchianism, see K.S. Latourette, *History of the Expansion of Christianity*. Vol. 1. *The First Five Centuries* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode; rev. ed. New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 143-144; also H. Chadwick, *The Early Church* (London: Penguin, 1967), 85-90, where he specifies this position as a critique of *Logos* theology.

<sup>14</sup> On Christ as *Logos* and *Logos* theology, see Latourette, *Expansion of Christianity*, 141-143; and J. Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*. Vol. 1. *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 186-190, particularly 187-188.

<sup>15</sup> On Theodotus see Stevenson, *A New Eusebius*, 144-145; and on Paul of Samosata, Stevenson, *A New Eusebius*, 261-262.

<sup>16</sup> On Arius' career and thought, see Frances W. Young, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon. A Guide to the Literature and its Background* (London: SCM, 1983), 58-64.



who did not previously exist, out of nothing. Thus they teach that there was a time when he did not exist, inasmuch as the Son is a creature, and a work. They also teach that he is neither like the Father with regard to his essence, nor is he either the Father's true Word, or true Wisdom by nature; rather, the Son is just one of his works and creatures, being erroneously called Word and Wisdom, since he was himself made of God's own Word and the Wisdom which is in God, whereby God both made all things and him also.<sup>17</sup>

For Arius, Jesus was a special person, but not fully divine. Jesus had a human body, but not a human soul; the *Logos* took the place of the human soul. Essentially Jesus thus was neither fully God, for the *Logos* in him was created; neither was he fully human, since he lacked a human soul.

Although such an attempt to protect the unity of God may resonate with Muslim students, Arius' accent on the subordination of the Son was unacceptable for the Christian church. He was challenged by his bishop Alexander, who used the language and conceptions of Origen to insist on the unity of the divine monad, while regarding the Son as a separate person with his own nature (*phusis*) or *hupostasis* (real

existence). As *Logos*, Christ was not simply a creature, but eternal, and that equally with the Father.

Although the Father may be said to be unbegotten (*agennetos*), while the Son is 'begotten' or 'generated' (*gennetos*), such statements do not imply what Arius claimed with the slogan, 'there was time when he was not', namely that Jesus, because he was begotten, was different in essence from Father, or that he was created, mutable, and liable to sin. Rather, the council affirmed that Jesus is begotten from eternity, as image and likeness of the Father: all that can be attributed to the Father, also belongs to the Son. The Nicene council was serious in its use of the term 'equal in substance' (*homoousion*), to exclude the position of Arius.<sup>18</sup>

## 6 The Triune God

Islamic students have at least as much of a problem with the 'triune' nature of God, which is the settled teaching of the Christian church after the first four ecumenical councils. Numerous passages in the Qur'an reflect the unacceptability of God as 'three in one', as an indication of polytheism, and appear to understand a role for Mary in the Triune God.<sup>19</sup> However, the Christian understanding of the Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) does not speak of three gods; nor does it recognize Mary as third member of the Trinity.

<sup>17</sup> The citation uses a modification of the translation of Socrates, *History of the Church* 1.6 in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (NPNF)*. Second series. H. Wace and Ph. Schaff eds. (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1890-1900; Grand Rapids, MI : Eerdmans, 1974-1983). Also available in the 'Church Fathers' on the *Christian Classics Ethereal Library*, prepared at Calvin College (Grand Rapids MI) and available online.

<sup>18</sup> On the role of the term '*homoousion*' at the Nicene council, see also Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, 200-210.

<sup>19</sup> The Qur'an Sura 5 (Table Spread):73 and 116; Sura 6 (Cattle)100-101; and Sura 4 (The Women):171.



It is true that by the time of the third ecumenical council (Ephesus, 431), the Christians of the Middle East paid considerable attention to Mary as 'mother of God', recognizing her as *Theotokos* (i.e. the one who gave birth to God). As patriarch of Constantinople, Nestorius had aroused popular anger by applying only the title *Christotokos* (i.e. the one who gave birth to the Christ) for Mary, on the assumption that calling her *Theotokos* would fail to do justice to Christ's humanity.

According to the church historian Socrates, Nestorius was led astray by his associate Anastasius:

Preaching one day in the church, Anastasius said, 'Let no one call Mary *Theotokos*: for Mary was but a woman; and it is impossible that God should be born of a woman.' These words ... (appeared) to separate his humanity from his divinity on account of the economy of incarnation. Nestorius ... delivered several public discourses ... and totally rejected the epithet *Theotokos*. ... Thus he acquired the reputation among the masses of asserting the blasphemous dogma that the Lord is a mere man.<sup>20</sup>

The council of Ephesus condemned Nestorius, while it upheld the position of his opponent, Cyril of Alexandria, who favoured the title *Theotokos* for Mary:

For if our Lord Jesus Christ is God, how can the Holy Virgin who gave birth to him not be the Mother of God? This is the faith which the divinely inspired disciples handed

down, even though they did not use that term. ... Keeping to orthodox thinking, we do not say that God became the father of flesh, nor that the divine nature was born through a woman without the addition of humanity. Rather, we bring together in unity the Word sprung from God, and the humanity perfectly sprung from the holy Virgin, into one Christ Jesus our Lord, whom we adore. ...

So the Word of God took to himself the seed of Abraham and shared in human blood and flesh, making his own a body from a woman. In that way, he remained God, but also became man like us, in unity.... Saint Paul asks us to believe this when he says, "When the fullness of time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that he might redeem those under the law, so that we may receive sonship [Gal. 4:4-5]."<sup>21</sup>

We note in passing that the title *Theotokos* for Mary is quite unacceptable for Muslims, while the title *Christotokos* would not be problematic, as it indicates no more than that she bore the Messiah.

It is important to recognize that the specific form of the Trinity to which the Qur'an objects is not that of orthodox Christian interpretation.<sup>22</sup> It is possi-

<sup>20</sup> Socrates, *History of the Church*, 7.32. NPNF ser. 2.

<sup>21</sup> Cyril's *Letter 1*, translated by J. Kenny, at "Muslims Query Christian Beliefs" <[www.josephkennyjoyeurs.com/Query.htm](http://www.josephkennyjoyeurs.com/Query.htm)> accessed 20 February 2012. On Nestorius, see Young, *Nicaea to Chalcedon*, 229-240; and on Cyril of Alexandria, see Young, *Nicaea to Chalcedon*, 240-265.

<sup>22</sup> See The Qur'an Sura 5 (The Table Spread):73 and 116; Sura 6 (Cattle):101.

ble that Muhammad had contact with a Christian group, something like the Maryamiyya sect who accepted a counterfeit Trinity, one which included the Father, Mary and Jesus. Adherents of this view were opposed and excommunicated by Christian authorities by the end of seventh century.

The settlement on the Trinity came with the ecumenical Christian council of Constantinople (381). Athanasius had been instrumental in clarifying the meaning of the decision of the Nicene council on the full deity of Christ.<sup>23</sup> Athanasius' work was affirmed at Constantinople, a gathering which also confirmed the full deity of the Holy Spirit. The 'generation' of Christ was determined as an 'eternal generation', not an act of God's will. Accordingly, the Son was recognized as sharing fully in the divine nature of God, yet remaining truly distinct in that he is 'begotten' and has his own role. The council affirmed one identical divine essence in three distinct and also interpenetrating consubstantial beings.

However, the issue did not go away entirely, for the bishop of Syrian Laodicea, Apollinarius (d. 390), a supporter of Athanasius, had emphasized the divine nature of Christ as crucial to human salvation (understood as human participation in divine nature). Apollinarius accepted Jesus having a human body and soul, but in the attempt to assure unity of person, claimed that Christ did not have a human mind; the *Logos*, as divine highest directing principle, replaced the reasoning spirit. This raised the question, whether Christ then was fully human.

Apollinarius' position reversed that of Arius, who taught that in Jesus the *Logos* replaced the soul (while the body is fully human); for Apollinarius, Son was fully divine because for him the *Logos* was fully divine, but he was not fully human. The second ecumenical council, that of Constantinople (381), condemned this position, confirming that Jesus was fully human, with also a human mind.<sup>24</sup>

It is clear that the position of Nestorius represents the opposite extreme of that presented by Apollinarius. Nestorius wanted to preserve the distinction of the human and divine nature, both complete and real, and especially the human aspect. Rejecting Nestorius' version of the person of Christ, the council of Ephesus asked that Nestorius be exiled to the upper Nile region, where he survived for at least twenty years, and from where his understanding of the person of Jesus made a considerable impact. The issue of the divine and human aspects of Jesus' person was revisited at the council of Chalcedon, which gave a more even-handed judgement, but did not go so far as to reverse the condemnation of Nestorius. Nestorianism survived in the Persian empire, and also in Syria. By the seventh century it reached China. Even today, Nestorian churches survive in Turkey near Persia, and in India.<sup>25</sup>

## 7 Canon of Scripture

Christianity recognizes the Scriptures,

<sup>24</sup> On the decisions of this council, see Chadwick, *Early Church*, 150-151.

<sup>25</sup> On the considerable influence of Nestorian thinking in the Middle East, see Latourette, *Expansion of Christianity*, 169-170.

<sup>23</sup> On the significant role of Athanasius, see Latourette, *Expansion of Christianity*, 157-161.

including both the Old and New Testament, as the Word of God. Islam similarly has a high regard for the Qur'an as a sacred book, representing the uncreated eternal word of Allah; but it is true that Mutazilites, a medieval school of Islamic thought which used Greek philosophy in an attempt to dialogue with European philosophy, rejected an uncreated Qur'an, existing in heaven as 'mother' of the book. Even so, it is generally accepted that the Qur'an came straight from heaven by inspiration, without the intervention of any human factor.

Christian understanding of the origin of the Scriptures, on the other hand, does acknowledge the human element. The Scriptures clearly present human writers speaking to human readers, to convey the message inspired by, and coming from God.

Unlike the Qur'an, the Scriptures do not separate the words of God from those of the prophets, historians, or other writers who convey these. Nor do Christians put as much emphasis on perfect preservation throughout the centuries. Christian scholars of the Bible do study the various manuscript traditions to determine as best they can what must have been the original version, but at no points have textual variants presented a substantive challenge to the basics of the faith clearly presented in the Scriptures.

Muslim scholars, on the other hand, find it important to affirm the Qur'an as perfectly preserved from any tampering through the centuries, even though it is a matter of historical record that variant versions of the Qur'an were still circulating after Muhammad's death, and that these were gathered and burned under the third caliphate,

so that only one 'authorized' version would remain.

Islam recognizes the Christian Bible as (containing) the Word of God, the Old Testament for Jews, and New Testament for Christians;<sup>26</sup> but they assert that the Old Testament and New Testament contain human commentary which gets in the way of the 'real word' of God as it came to Moses and Jesus respectively. Accordingly, they find the Scriptures to have been passed along in a format that is inferior to that of the Qur'an as they understand Muhammad to have received it.

Thus Muslim scholars are critical of God's Word as preserved in the Bible, claiming that the real *Taurat* (the law, revealed to Moses) and *Injil* (the gospel, revealed to Jesus) are different from those we now have as Old Testament and New Testament, respectively; the originals are said to have been corrupted.<sup>27</sup> Numerous biblical stories can be found also in the Qur'an, but there they are typically given in a version which differs substantially from the biblical version; some of these variants can be traced to non-canonical second century gospels.

In early Christianity the issue of the canon of Scripture became important because of the challenge of Gnostic gospels. What were the criteria for inclusion in the 'canon' or authoritative list of books? Who decided what was authentic, and thus ought to be used

---

26 The Qur'an Sura 29 (The Spider):46.

27 On such a critical approach, see my review article, "The Biblical Canon: A Response to Muhib O. Opeyoye, 'Building Bridges of Understanding between Islam and Christianity in Nigeria' (2001)", in *TCNW Research Bulletin* 41 (March 2004), 31-42.

for public worship? Most important was the criterion of 'apostolicity': the books accepted were those written by the apostles or their close associates. This became an important criterion in rejecting deuterocanonical gospels, like the Gospel of Thomas, particularly as these reflected Gnostic teachings.

Another important criterion was the widespread acceptance in the churches, East and West, in Europe and in Africa. Indeed, inclusion of books like Hebrews, James, or Revelation was delayed over uncertainty on authorship. Books like the *Shepherd of Hermas*, though recognized as valuable for devotional reading, were finally not included in the canon because the apostolic connection was lacking.

Acceptance of the canon of Scripture as we have it was facilitated when Christianity became legal, and empire-wide ecumenical councils were held to deal with urgent issues of Christian life and teaching. For the East, Athanasius' festal letter of Easter, AD 367, lists the New Testament books just as we have them: four gospels, Acts, the general epistles, Pauline epistles, and Revelation. In the West, the council of Hippo Regius (393) and Carthage (397), where Augustine was influential, gave an official list of 27 New Testament writings to be used for church services; this list also tallies exactly with the canonical list still accepted today.

Closure of the canon in the fourth century did not reflect a new decision by the church, but culmination of a gradual consensus on the authenticity of those books representing apostolic witness to the life and work of Jesus. Certainly, the process was stimulated by the need to discern heretical teach-

ings about Jesus (Docetism and Gnosticism), forcing the church to determine authentic writings that could be traced back to eye-witness accounts. Just as Israel, from very early years, treasured the Mosaic Torah as a guide to community life, so also from the earliest decades the Christian congregations treasured the gospels and letters of Paul as the core of a New Testament canon, for life and for public worship.

Does this gradual growth in acceptance of the canon of Scripture reflect a process which is regrettable because it allowed for error in transmission? As noted above, Islamic scholars assume that this process allowed for corruption of the original *Taurat* or *Injil*.<sup>28</sup> They believe there are errors arising from interpolation of the words of God with those of the writers, making it difficult to discern what is truly the 'Word of God'.

In evaluating this position it must first be recognized that the Old and New Testaments were written by numerous authors, over a period of centuries, while the Qur'an reflects revelations to one author over a period of less than thirty years. Using the Qur'an as model in judging the Scriptures, Islamic scholars recognize as 'revelation' only those statements which represent the 'very words' of God, namely words known to have been 'dictated' by God to Moses or Jesus.

Christians, on the other hand, regard the Scriptures as authentic not because they *contain* such statements, but because these writings witness accurately to the full-orbed story of God's saving acts of redemption in human

---

28 The Qur'an Sura 2 (The Cow):79.

history. Christians do not limit divine revelation to Bible passages introduced specifically with, 'Thus says the Lord', as we sometime find these marked in 'red-letter' Bibles.

For Muslims, translation of the Qur'an into languages other than Arabic is problematic since translation is thought, inevitably, to give rise to corruption: the word of God cannot be properly conveyed in a language different from that in which the prophets heard it spoken (Hebrew, Aramaic or Arabic). Yet, if copying or translating the Scriptures may have left room for 'errors', Christians have always regarded problems raised by such 'errors' as far outweighed by the benefits in support to the spread of the gospel.

The Christian faith is rooted in pivotal events of history; and divine revelation has actively involved human instruments. So also the central message of the Scriptures, the message of God's love and his intervention to save humankind was never threatened by minor inconsistencies of factual data; it is all the more firmly established by a multiplicity of witnesses, and by widespread acceptance as the church grew, spreading rapidly throughout the Roman Empire and beyond its borders.

#### IV Historical Encounters: Judaism, Christianity and early Islam

Muhammad initially took a positive approach to Christianity and Judaism; Mecca was familiar with Jewish tribes and Christians visiting from Abyssinia. When followers of Muhammad were persecuted in the early years, Christians protected and kept them safe in Ethiopia. Consideration of the relative

origins of parts of the Qur'an shows that earlier sections do not denounce Christians as infidels, recognizing them, rather, as monotheist.<sup>29</sup>

Muhammad recognized Jews and Christians as having valid revelations of their own as 'people of the book'. For this reason they would not be asked to convert; and the Qur'an affirms that there is to be no coercion in matters of faith.<sup>30</sup>

However, already before Muhammad died, hostility grew; the Qur'an reflects problems with the Trinity (as threat to divine unity, or in assigning God partners), and we find harsh criticism of Christians as polytheistic.

Muhammad clearly had anticipated cooperation from the Jewish tribes, for from the beginning he adopted their practice of communal prayer (on Friday), and fasting on the day of Atonement. It is also clear that friendly Jews had informed him about biblical accounts. The turning point in the relationship came when Muhammad recognized the theological divide between Jews and Christians, and realized that Jews did not accept him as their prophet.

Hostility intensified after the battle of 627, when Muslims routed Meccans with a ditch around Medina. Because Muhammad felt that Jewish tribes had formed alliances with Mecca against him, he punished the Jews for deceit, betraying him to the Meccan clans. As traitors the Jews were expelled from Medina and massacred without mercy. During *salat* Muhammad now directed

<sup>29</sup> The Qur'an Sura 3 (The Family of Imran):113-114; Sura 29 (Spider):46.

<sup>30</sup> The Qur'an Sura 2 (The Cow):256.

prayers to Mecca, no longer facing Jerusalem (by which he had showing an intent to revert to the monotheism of Abraham).<sup>31</sup> From this time a polemical note characterizes reference to Jews in the Qur'an.<sup>32</sup> Jews, in turn, ridiculed Muhammad's version of stories of Noah and Moses.

We must also consider briefly which branch of Christianity Muhammad might have encountered. Would he have known the Monophysites as the sector of Christianity in the East at the time of Emperor Justinian (who died AD 565), as those who did not fully accept the human nature of Christ, insisting on 'one nature' (*monos phusis*), fully divine, with the divine encompassing the human, and the human fully united with the *Logos*? During that time, Monophysites dominated Ethiopia, Egypt, and Syria. Monophysite groups falling out politically with Constantinople (not appeased by fifth ecumenical council of 553) was clearly a factor in the rapidity with which Arabs were able to take Antioch in 611, and again in 638, with Jerusalem; Alexandria in 618/619, and again in 742; and Damascus in 635.

After the rise of the Monophysites, a parallel problem arose with Monothelites (from ca. 638) who affirmed 'one will' in Christ: the divine encompassing the human. Monothelites (today known as Maronites) lived in Lebanon into the 12th century. Monophysites and Nestorians also lived independently in the Arab world for many centuries. It is difficult to think of such groups being represented in the Chris-

tian views known to Muhammad (who died 632), for he would certainly have been more critical of their high view of the divinity of Christ.

Did Muhammad encounter a sect, or a group of Judaized Christians? Scholars are not agreed on the matter. Joseph Kenny does not believe that the Judaeo-Christians he met were a heretical group.<sup>33</sup> It is possible that Islamic emphasis on Mary as 'mother of Jesus' reflects Nestorian disdain for 'Cyrillian' recognition of Mary as 'mother of God'. An inclination to a docetic approach, and the evidence of Gnostic dualism, has also remained a factor in Islamic thought throughout its history. The precise origins of these trends cannot easily be traced.

## V Other Aspects

### 1 Music and mystical themes

When Muslim students encounter Christian positions flatly at odds with their own, whether it be the Christian view of the deity of Christ, or the Trine God, they typically tune out the lecturer, and their eyes glaze over. No matter what efforts are made, it makes no difference. Taught to regard their religion as the superior, final revelation, Muslims are protective of their own core teachings, and resistant to any arguments to the contrary; paying attention to the claims of Christianity could be regarded as the first step on the road to conversion.

---

<sup>33</sup> See Joseph Kenny, "Early Islam" at <[www.josephkenny.joyeurs.com/earlyislam/E06.htm](http://www.josephkenny.joyeurs.com/earlyislam/E06.htm)> and <<http://www.josephkenny.joyeurs.com/earlyislam/E13.htm>> (chapters 6.2 and 13.11), accessed 20 February 2012.

<sup>31</sup> The Qur'an Sura 6 (Cattle):159 and 161.

<sup>32</sup> The Qur'an Sura 5 (The Table Spread):82.



Even so, there are some aspects of the course to which students do pay attention. The author stumbled on one of these when speaking of Ambrose of Milan and his significance for hymnology. I used the story of Ambrose protecting the church building against Arian designs with an all-night vigil and singing of hymns to maintain morale.<sup>34</sup> When students asked what kind of hymns these might have been, I introduced them to the 'Te Deum', the fourth century hymn whose history can be traced to Ambrose, 'Holy God, we praise your name', especially the fourth stanza in the hymnal at our disposal:

Holy Father, Holy Son, Holy Spirit,  
three we name you,  
Though in essence only one;  
undivided God we claim you,  
And adoring bend the knee, while  
we own the mystery.

I did not mention that the melody is probably not fourth century, nor did I spend much time on the strong trinitarian wording, as a response to the Arian dispute. What struck me was the *rapit attention* of the students for the singing of this hymn, certainly not due to my own musical ability. It struck me that their fascination probably reflects interest in the role of music in religion, a factor deeply embedded in the history of Christianity, largely missing in Islam.

I found a similar response to reading from Augustine's *Confessions*. Augustine represents the last major figure studied in the course, and I like to

end on a high note, by reading some of my favourite passages from the *Confessions*. The first is that found in Book 10. 6.8-9:

8. ... But *what do I love when I love You?* Not physical beauty, or the splendour of our existence in time, or the radiance of the light which is so pleasant to our eyes, or the sweet melodies of familiar songs, or the flagrant smell of flowers, and ointments, and spices; nor is it the taste of manna and honey, or the arms with which we like to embrace one another.

*These are not the things I love when I love my God;* and yet there is a certain kind of light, and sound, and fragrance, and food, and embracement which I love when loving my God..

9. *And what is this, my God?* I asked the earth; and it answered, 'I am not He;' and everything in it made the same reply. I asked the sea and its depth, and the creeping things that live in it, and they replied, 'We are not your God, seek higher than us.' I asked the gentle breezes, and the air with all its inhabitants answered me, 'Anaximenes<sup>35</sup> was deceived; I am not God.' I asked the heavens, the sun, the moon, and stars: 'Neither,' they said, 'are we the God whom you seek.' And I spoke to all these things which crowd about my bodily existence, 'You have told me about my God,

<sup>34</sup> On Ambrose and his use of hymns, see Latourette, *Expansion of Christianity*, 206-208; and Augustine's *Confessions* 9.7 (15), and 9.12 (32).

<sup>35</sup> He refers to the 6th century BC philosopher Anaximenes, who considered air to be the chief component of reality.



that you are not He; then tell me something about Him.' And with a loud voice they all cried out, 'He made us.' I questioned them further by fixing my attention on them; and their beauty was their reply.

.... I asked all the vast bulk of the earth about my God, and it answered me, 'I am not He, but He made me.'

The theme of love for God is continued in sections 27.38 and 29.40:

38. *Too late I came to love You, O Beauty, so ancient, and yet so new!* Too late I came to love You. For You were within me, and I remained outside, and tried to seek You there; I, unlovely, rushed about wildly among the things of beauty which You made. You were with me, but I was not with You. ...

40. *All my hopes are in Your great mercy alone.* So give what You command, and command what You will.

## 2 Role of Sufism

Such reactions of the students have led me to recognize the deep influence of *Sufism*, the mystical branch of Sunni Islam in West Africa. Today with the strong influence of Saudi Arabia, Sunni Islam predominates. But Sufism was politically influential in Nigeria until the 1970s, and continues to hold attraction.

Arising in the tenth and eleventh centuries, Sufism represents a mystic protest against the intellectualism of Islamic thought (like that of the Mutazilites), a desire for closer contact with

God, with a focus on trust and love. Sufi leaders developed their own liturgy in recitation, repeating the name of God, with physical exercises and postures, to encourage a religious experience of enlightenment: *gnosis* or religious mystical knowledge.

From the twelfth century Sufi orders developed, each with their own liturgy and esoteric practices, often with distinctive robes. These orders spread, especially when a strong personality assumed leadership, teaching the way of union with God. Some of the most famous Islamic poets, al-Farid (1182-1235) and Rumi (1207-1273), were Sufi mystics, teaching the way of prayer, and modelling lives of service and love.

Along with some unorthodox practices and ideas, Sufism opened the way to a more personal experience in religion. While many great figures in Islamic history have been affected by Sufism, the concepts and practices connected with the mystical approach have not received universal Muslim acceptance.

## VI The Relevance of the Nigerian Experience

Our interest in presenting these issues is motivated by the fact that, together with colleague Musa Gaiya, who specializes in (African) church history, we are writing an introductory text to meet the needs of these students. Available textbooks assume too much acquaintance with Christian issues and terminology. There is also a lack of sensitivity to the peculiar difficulties of Muslim students in their study of this period of history.

In terms of the contribution of this

course for dialogue and the resolution of misunderstanding between Christians and Muslims, we note that the important decisions of the great ecumenical councils on the two natures of Christ and the triune character of God, were achieved before Islam came on the scene. Only discussion of icons at the seventh (and last) ecumenical council (AD 787) was affected by the Islamic ban on human representation, although Judaism had also banned representation of God as idolatry (with the second commandment).

This factor needs to be recognized for its implications for future discussion. We realize that for meaningful discussion between the Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant branches of Christianity the period of early Christianity is crucial. This explains the origin of the Oxford conferences in Patristics held every four years.

The present paper would suggest that we expand the context of dialogue, recognizing that important decisions for the three major religious groups (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) which have a clear family relation in Abraham as common ancestor, have their roots in the period before the

seventh century. Even contemporary reading of the Torah in Judaism was determined in crucial ways in the early centuries of the Christian era, through the important decisions of the council of Jamnia.<sup>36</sup> And it should be clear from the above discussion that scholars of Islamic history would do well to take an interest in early rabbinic Judaism and early Christianity for better understanding of early Islamic thought.

In a time when we lurch from crisis to crisis in the Middle East and on the international scene, and these crises are all too readily identified with the major groups of religion, it is time to go back to the roots—too easily forgotten in the stress and tension of the modern world, with an agenda all too often set by terrorists or fundamentalists with little interest in historical precedent. In such a context, this paper would propose a new role for the study of early Christianity, one that seeks to foster constructive discussion with Muslim colleagues and neighbours.

---

<sup>36</sup> On Jamnia as a significant turning point in Judaism, see Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*. 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 423-425.

## **Mission to the World: Communicating the Gospel in the 21st Century**

### **Essays in Honour of Knud Jørgensen**

Tormod Engelsen, Ernst Harbakk, Rolv Olsen, Thor Strandenæs (Editors)

This book focuses on the frontier of mission, the content of mission, and the twenty-first century context of contemporary mission.

**Tormod Engelsen** is Professor of Missiology at MF Norwegian Lutheran School of Theology.

978-1-870345-64-4 / 229 x 152mm / 472pp / £29.99

**Paternoster, Authenticmedia Limited, 52 Presley Way,  
Crownhill, Milton Keynes, MK8 0ES**