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The Ethics of Qur'an Interpretation in Muslim Evangelism and Insider Movements

Sasan Tavasoli and Kevin Higgins

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I Sasan: Christians cannot accept the Qur'an or the prophethood of Mohamed

Dear Kevin,

I consider it a great honour and privilege to have been asked by the *Evangelical Review of Theology* to dialogue with you about *Insider Movements (IM)*, an important controversy that is facing the evangelical church. This is a topic that generates a great deal of emotion and heat, especially for those who are passionate about seeing the gospel of Christ lifted up among Muslims. I trust that our exchanges will contribute to shedding more light on this controversy than heat! I not only consider you a dear brother in Christ, but also a friend and a co-labourer in the spread of the gospel in the Muslim world. I know that you and I are both passionate and committed to seeing Muslims

come to a saving faith in Christ and yet we also have profound disagreements about the legitimacy and validity of certain aspects of IM, especially what is known as the C5 aspect of this movement.

I acknowledge that there are a variety of views within IM. Even within the C5 position there is a spectrum in terms of the identity of converts and how they ought to view the Qur'an and the prophet of Islam. In our exchanges I am mostly concerned with those followers of Christ who not only call themselves Muslims (as people who have truly submitted to God) but also view Muhammad as a genuine prophet from God and the Qur'an as God's revelation.¹

My red lines in this controversy have always been two things: Can a Christian acknowledge the prophethood of Muhammad? And can a Chris-

¹ See Kevin Higgins, 'Identity, Integrity and Insider Movements', *IJFM* 23 (3) (Fall 2006), 32-38.

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tian acknowledge the Qur'an as God's revelation? I believe that a biblical response to the above two questions is a resounding 'No'.

In our dialogue together I want to focus my critique of C5 on one particular concern and that has to do with the honesty and integrity of how such C5 advocates approach the *text of the Qur'an and Islamic faith and practice*. Now let me point out that having grown up as an Iranian Shi'ite Muslim in a Sufi home, I fully believe that Islam is not one giant monolithic faith. I do acknowledge that throughout its history and to this day, 'Islam' has not been understood, interpreted and practised in the same way by all its adherents. There is a tremendous variety in the faith and practice of Muslims around the world.

Nevertheless, in all this multifaceted variety, Muslims have never understood that the Qur'an teaches or supports such foundational Christian doctrines as the divine Lordship of Christ, the doctrine of the Trinity, and Jesus' death on the cross as the atonement for human sin. In fact, Muslims have been almost unanimous that the Qur'an and Islamic theology have quite categorically refuted the above Christian affirmations as false and a corruption of the teachings of the prophet Jesus.

When C5 advocates use of the Qur'an to affirm the deity of Christ (thus attempting to demonstrate the basic harmony and compatibility between the Qur'an and the Bible), it seems to me that they are twisting certain passages out of the total Qur'anic context. Just as we don't like it when members of various cults or other religions take the Bible out of context, we

should not take things out of context in the Qur'an or any other text for that matter in order to build a bridge for our evangelistic outreach.

When C5 advocates promote the practice of *shahada*, which acknowledges that Muhammad is God's prophet, it seems to me that they are redefining the role and function of Muhammad as a 'prophet' in a way which goes against how Islam has understood Muhammad's prophethood.²

Christians do not have a *shahada* like Islam per se, but I think if we wanted to choose a candidate for a good biblical passage it would be 1 John 5:10-12,

Anyone who believes in the Son of God has this testimony in his heart. Anyone who does not believe in God has made him out to be a liar, because he has not believed the testimony God has given about his Son. And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. (NIV)³

On the other hand we encounter in the Qur'an the following verdict on Christian convictions about Jesus. Sura 9:30 states,

...and the Christians call Christ the Son of God. That is a saying from their mouth; (In this) they but

2 According to C5 advocates, Muhammad can be viewed as a 'prophet' who ultimately pointed people to Jesus. In the Islamic view based on the Qur'an, it is actually Jesus that points to Muhammad as the ultimate and final prophet.

3 The terms *shahada* and 'testimony' (or 'witness') function very similarly in Arabic and Greek.

imitate what the unbelievers of old used to say. God's curse be on them: how they are deluded away from the Truth!

Acknowledging Jesus as the Son of God is either the key to having eternal life (the Bible) or puts us under the curse of God (the Qur'an). Both cannot be true.

So ultimately, I believe that the Qur'an contradicts and opposes the Bible on some of the most important issues that have to do with our convictions about God, Christ and salvation. One cannot claim to follow the Jesus of the Bible and at the same time accept the Qur'an as God's revelation or accept the prophet of Islam as someone commissioned and sent by God for the guidance of humanity.

II Kevin: The question is different for an Insider

Dear Sasan,

Thank you for your gracious words in your opening comments. I share the same sense of respect and have enjoyed and appreciated the face to face discussions we were able to have in June 2012. I also appreciate your sensitivity to the variety of expressions and opinions within what have come to be called 'insider movements', and the advocates of such movements (including myself). I think it bears mentioning that I know the same is true of those who hold strong reservations about such movements: not everyone would agree on each point nor express their views in quite the same way.

You raise two crucial questions: Can a Christian acknowledge the prophethood of Muhammad? And can a Chris-

tian acknowledge the Qur'an as God's revelation? You rightly link the two issues as two sides of the same coin. I will respond in a similar way rather than taking each one separately.

Sasan, I know your answer to this is 'no', and I would say that my view probably agrees with yours, at least as you have framed the question. But then, what is all the heat about? As you point out, I and others have suggested that there may be ways of speaking of Muhammad having a prophetic role, and the Qur'an containing truths that find their ultimate source in God, and hence our conversation.

In clarifying the concerns expressed in your paper it seems to me that one particularly critical issue is at play: is it appropriate to hold a view of Muhammad and the Qur'an that would be at odds with the vast majority of Muslims in the past and today (while claiming to still be Muslim, or claiming that such a different viewpoint could fit within Islam.) Some insiders prefer not to speak of Muhammad as a prophet at all, while others see him much more positively. None thinks of him the same way as the majority of Muslims around them do.

Before I respond to the questions themselves, I want to clarify something. The questions are both framed in terms of what a Christian might believe or hold, and also seem to be particularly concerned about what IM advocates believe regarding these questions. If I am correct two comments follow.

First, I agree with you that non-Muslim voices trying to articulate positions relative to the Qur'an and Muhammad would be offensive to Muslims. But you raise a second side of this question which is critical: can 'insiders' hold

views of Muhammad at odds with other Muslims and do so with integrity? Perhaps our discussions would best be served if we focus on that question. Thus, I want to highlight the fact that by definition people in IMs are, by their own self-identification, *Muslims* who believe in Jesus as Lord and Saviour. As such they seek to be a voice in the Muslim community, participating in reflection on these issues. It is a Muslim discussion about the Bible and the relative place for the Qur'an or Muhammad. The question emerges from that reflection in the light of the Bible and the new (for a Muslim believer) revelation of the Person and Work of Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

Of course, the vast majority of Muslims may well reject such a self-identification on the part of Muslim Followers of Christ, as well as the re-interpretations such believers suggest relative to Muhammad and the Qur'an. The point is that such a discussion is a Muslim discussion. In my experience Muslim 'insiders' who have come to believe in Jesus as Lord, in the Bible as God's inspired Word, and who gather regularly in fellowship with others who believe the same for ongoing study of the scriptures, will in fact find that their beliefs are at odds with Muslim orthodoxy. The response of the majority community to this has varied in different contexts.

Now I will comment on your point about using the Qur'an in a way that is at odds with what Muslims understand, while at the same time failing to address the fact that parts of the Qur'an are in direct contradiction to the biblical message (or, in some passages, seem to be). It seems obvious to me that exactly such an approach

is what Paul uses with the poets and philosophers in his speech in Athens (Acts 17). He cites a hymn dedicated to Zeus, for example, and yet redirects it in a way that I am sure would be at odds with how the text was originally intended, and with how most non-believing contemporaries of Paul would naturally have understood the text. In so doing Paul does not endorse everything those poets and philosophers he cites may have written. But he does acknowledge the truth in what he cites.

The Acts 17 text is *descriptive*, and not necessarily *prescriptive*. One may read it and conclude that Paul was wrong to do what he did, or that it is not an example that we should follow. I know some IM critics do see it that way. I take it as a Spirit-inspired example, though not one that *must* be followed in every circumstance, and also I do not see it as the only approach for work in Muslim contexts.

So, your concern about using a text in a way that our Muslim friends would not recognize as valid is an important point and concern. However, there is biblical precedent for such an approach. My own take on this is that I believe that other interpretations of the Qur'an which differ from the norm are possible and in some cases even probable, and I would add that there are Muslims who are holding these divergent views. However, we are wise to be sensitive to how these are presented. Perhaps a future exchange between us could outline some parameters?

Finally, I want to close by emphasizing some of what the insiders I know do believe: Jesus as Lord and Saviour, salvation by grace through faith via the merit of his death and resurrection, the Bible as the final Word and authority.

III Sasan: A Christian reading of the Qur'an is not credible to Muslims

Dear Kevin,

Thank you, as always, for your thoughtful responses. In my interactions with you over these past few months and even in our current conversation, I have learned a great deal about various issues surrounding this topic. But I am still struggling profoundly with the same concerns about certain C5 positions and practices that I raised with you in my first letter.

Kevin, before interacting directly with a number of points that you raised, let me first tell you how I was drawn into this controversy. My first encounter with an IM advocate was in the summer of 2006. I was teaching a course on Islam to a dozen Iranian Christian converts from Islam. An evangelical missionary came to lecture these Iranian students for one morning. He told us that in their work in a particular Asian country believers in Christ profess the *shahada*, do all the daily rituals in the mosque, celebrate all the Islamic feasts (and no Christian events on the calendar like Christmas, Easter, Pentecost), read the Qur'an on a regular basis, etc. He also claimed that 99% of the Qur'an was just fine and compatible with the Christian faith and he could actually demonstrate the deity of Christ from the Qur'an (for example, only God can create, Jesus created a bird, thus Jesus must be divine). He also recommended that as Iranians we should be open to this approach and experiment with it among our own people.

I believe the above approach is not an honest way of reading the Qur'an or

practising Islam. My fundamental objection is this: Throughout its history Islamic theology, the teachings and traditions of Muhammad and the text of the Qur'an have been understood by Muslims and non-Muslims to explicitly repudiate the core of the Christian faith in regard to such truths as the Triune identity of God, the deity of Christ and his atoning death on the cross. From Rumi to Ayatollah Khomeini, from Ibn Taymiyya to Abdol Karim Soroush, regardless of whether one is a medieval mystic or an ultra-orthodox theologian, or whether one is a radical anti-western cleric or a very westernized liberal philosopher, these Muslims are in complete agreement in their rejection of the above Christian doctrines and their acceptance that the Qur'an in its totality is God's final revelation and Muhammad is the seal of the prophets.

Therefore, it is very natural to become suspicious when all of a sudden, after 1400 years in the encounters between Islam and Christianity, we are hearing from various individuals (both 'Insiders' and 'Along-siders'), that the Qur'an can actually be re-interpreted as a text that points its readers to faith in Christ as Lord and Saviour and Muhammad could be viewed as some kind of a prophet with a similar mission of pointing people to the gospel. From the medieval theologian, Ibn Taymiyya to the contemporary apologist, Jamal Badawi, Muslims have also 're-interpreted' the Gospels from an Islamic perspective in order to demonstrate that Christians have misunderstood or distorted the teachings of Jesus and to make the Gospels compatible with the orthodox Islamic understanding of Jesus. I am afraid that much of our Christian or Insider 're-interpretation'

of the Qur'an treats that text the same way that these Muslims have treated the Gospels.

You write: 'there may be ways of speaking of Muhammad having a prophetic role, and the Qur'an containing truths that find their ultimate source in God'. For me this is the crux of the matter in our debate. I don't know how a follower of Christ can make room for understanding Muhammad as having a 'prophetic role' and more than that, define that role in a way that has been accepted by any Muslim in the past 1400 years of Islamic history. For example, Miroslav Volf urges his readers to consider that one can be 100 percent Christian and 100 percent Muslim, as in the case of Ann Redding, the Episcopal priest, who also professed faith in Islam. He also thinks that a Christian can 'believe that Muhammad was a prophet (not the "Seal of Prophets", but a prophet the way in which we might designate Martin Luther King Jr. a "prophet")'.⁴

The problem is that no Muslim has ever claimed that Muhammad was a prophet in the same way that some consider Martin Luther King was a prophet! Or to say that the Qur'an can contain certain truths that find their ultimate source in God, in addition to being very vague and ambiguous to begin with, is still a far cry from how Muslims have viewed the issue of Qur'anic inspiration throughout their history.

You ask whether it is appropriate to hold a view of Muhammad and the Qur'an that would be at odds with the vast majority of Muslims in the past

and today. This is a great question. As Christians we might not be in a position to judge the internal debates of orthodoxy in Islam. We don't involve ourselves in the debates that Sunnis have with the Shi'ites or Alawites, or Ahmadiyyas or the Ismaeilis or the Baha'is, etc. But when the question touches on whether it is possible to accept Jesus as Lord and Saviour and at the same time Muhammad as God's apostle (or submit to the Bible and the Qur'an at the same time), then this is no longer just 'a Muslim discussion about the Bible, and the relative place for the Qur'an or Muhammad'. As Christians we have every right and duty to be involved in this debate if we care about not getting the gospel caught up in religious syncretism.

Finally, let me say that I don't believe that what Paul is doing in Acts 17 relates to my concerns in these discussions. At most what we can justify, based on Paul's example, is the practice of citing a few passages in the Qur'an in our *evangelism* as bridges and pointers to Christ. This is a far cry from the *regular* and *religious* use of the Qur'an and acknowledging it as having come from God.

Thank you, Kevin for taking time to engage with me on these issues. I am looking forward to our continued conversation on these important topics.

IV Kevin: Christian truths in the Qur'an?

Dear Sasan,

I thank you again as well. I understand why your 'profound struggle' continues, and appreciate how you are engaging the issues. My response will work

⁴ Miroslav Volf, *Allah: A Christian Response* (NY: HarperOne, 2011), 199.

through your last contribution as I go.

One of your first queries arose from your 2006 encounter with a missionary. One of the points that seems most pertinent for our discussion is the view of the Qur'an that the missionary was endorsing:

...that 99% of the Qur'an was just fine and compatible with the Christian faith...he could...demonstrate the deity of Christ from the Qur'an...' and, as you cite later, '...the Qur'an as a book can actually be re-interpreted as a text that points its readers to faith in Christ as Lord and Saviour and Muhammad could be viewed as some kind of a prophet with a similar mission of pointing people to the gospel.

Perhaps a foundational question we should surface would be whether this view reflects the view of others who espouse IM approaches and whether there is general agreement on this matter. I will speak for the two insider movements I am most familiar with.

The leaders of one such movement would not agree at all with what you heard from the missionary: they see the Qur'an as a false book overall and they do not consider Muhammad as a prophet. They see their role as insiders to be a pragmatic one, remaining in the community as yeast in the dough to bring change and transformation.

The leaders of another movement take an almost opposite view. They do in fact claim that Islamic tradition has not rightly understood the Qur'an because the majority of Muslims paid only lip service to the previous Books and thus missed the key to a right reading of the Qur'an.

Your concern, as I read it, is that

such an approach, whether it comes from a Muslim believer in Jesus ('insider') or not, is dishonest and flies in the face of how Muslims have historically interpreted the Qur'an. Both groups of insiders I have just referred to would agree with you that this flies in the face of historic Islam. The second group would take exception to the claim that they are not being honest. It is quite appropriate to look at their views and state where you would agree and disagree. In fact, I do not completely agree with either set of leaders on these issues. What I do defend is their integrity in thinking through the position they have come to, and their right as believers to seek the Lord's wisdom as they search the Bible on these matters.

Later in your communication with me you cite my statement that 'there may be ways of speaking of Muhammad having a prophetic role, and the Qur'an containing truths that find their ultimate source in God'. You rightly point out that this statement is 'still a far cry from how Muslims have viewed the issue of Qur'anic inspiration throughout their history'.

I agree with you. However, I am not trying to describe what Muslims think nor what I think they would agree with, but rather what I think, as well as trying to represent what some of the views of insiders whom I know might be on these issues.

I am fully aware that both Muslims and Christians will disagree with some, even many, of my views and the views of my insider friends. I have been labelled a heretic from both sides. And in at least one occasion that I am aware of this put my life in immediate danger (just to be clear, the danger was not from Christians!).

Since I have touched upon my own thinking, let me move to another place where you quote me. I asked whether it is appropriate to hold a view of Muhammad and the Qur'an that would be at odds with the vast majority of Muslims in the past and today,⁵ and I replied that this is in many ways a Muslim discussion. To that you replied,

...when the question touches on whether it is possible to accept Jesus as Lord and Saviour and at the same time Muhammad as God's Apostle (or submit to the Bible and the Qur'an at the same time), then this is no longer just a Muslim discussion about the Bible...as Christians we have every right and duty to be involved in this debate...

I actually agree with you. But the way you have framed the debate here is not what I actually said. What I have said in various ways is that I can see a way of understanding Muhammad as having some sort of prophetic role, and that there are true things in the Qur'an. By extension, since I believe truth is

ultimately from God, those true things find their ultimate source in him. But that is not the same as accepting submission to both books. However, to reiterate, these are my views, not the views of Muslim insiders.

Finally, you mentioned that you don't believe that what Paul is doing in Acts 17 relates to your concerns and that at most what we see in Paul's example is the practice of citing a few passages from the Qur'an in evangelism. I believe Paul's theology in Acts 17 is more far reaching than just the citation of those hymns and philosophers. His way of incorporating the altar, the citations of pagan writers, and his portrayal of how God has sovereignly chosen the places and times for the habitations of all peoples precisely so that they may seek him, feel after him, and, indeed, find him all adds up to a way of seeing how God is at work in this world.

Thus, Acts 17 leads me to expect two things. First, the 'finding him' culminates in a call to faith in Jesus. Paul is exclusivist here, and so am I. Second, the 'finding him' may involve discovering clues that God himself has left for men and women to discover, including such clues as may be found in other religious traditions and world-views. I believe some of those clues are in the Qur'an. I don't think they got there accidentally or without God's involvement in some way. But in so saying I am not claiming that the entire book is full of such clues, nor that there are not passages that may indeed lead away. Nor am I saying this is akin to biblical inspiration.

I continue to pray for ongoing clarity.

⁵ In fact there are a variety of views among Muslims regarding Muhammad as prophet. In South Asia at least three very different views include the Barelvi's (Muhammad is God's noor/light, he is present and available, not only as an intercessor but personally); Deobandis (deny much of Barelvi beliefs but accept access to Allah through Muhammad's intercession on the last day); the Wahhabis (deny all of the above and see Barelvi's as polytheists). Some Muslims in South Asia have said that in theory there can be prophets after Muhammad, though not of his stature. There is vigorous and even violent debate on these differences. I agree that what 'insiders' say about Muhammad is unlikely to find wide acceptance among other Muslims. But in this they are not alone.

V Sasan: Impropriety in reinterpreting the Qur'an as supporting Christianity

Dear Kevin,

Greetings again my dear brother! And thank you for your patience with me in these discussions as I am trying to understand where some of our Insider friends are coming from. I think your responses have provided some clarity for me and I believe there are also issues that we should recognize as currently at an impasse in our discussions.

From the very beginning, the focus of my critique has been on the Insiders who believe a follower of Christ can also genuinely, albeit in a qualified way, acknowledge the Qur'an as God's word and Muhammad as a prophet. These are the followers of Christ that as you put it claim:

I can say I am a Muslim because the word Islam means submission and a Muslim is one who submits. So, I have submitted to God ultimately in His Word, Isa, and the Word of God in the Taurat, Zabur, and Injil which the Quran confirms. In addition I can accept and affirm all of the teaching of Muhammad as I find it in the Quran, and can say honestly that he had a prophetic role in calling Arab, Christian, and Jewish people of his time to repent. I can call him a prophet. I can say the shahadah with integrity because I believe Muhammad was called by God to a prophetic role. I read the Quran through the interpretive key of the Gospel and the previous books. When I read the Quran through that lense and filter I find that it agrees with the Bible and that perceived

contradictions are due to misunderstandings of the Quran (and in some cases there has been misunderstanding of the Bible as well by Christians).⁶

When I claim that I do not find this position 'honest', I do not mean that folks with this perspective are involved in fraud or deception. What I mean is that this is not a legitimate or genuine understanding of what the Qur'an claims for itself, what the Qur'an says about Jesus or the claims that Muslims have made in regard to the person and message and mission of their prophet. The above position is very different from your claim that 'there are true things in the Qur'an' or that God has left certain 'clues' about himself in the Qur'an, but not that 'the entire book is full of such clues, nor that there are not passages that may indeed lead away'.

I for one do not deny that there are 'true things in the Qur'an' (in the same way that there are true things in many books on history, poetry, philosophy, science and maths) or the fact that some Muslims have come to faith in Christ as a result of reading the Qur'anic descriptions concerning the uniqueness of Jesus. But I don't see how one can then conclude from such observations that Muhammad was a prophet or that the Qur'an agrees with the Bible in what it teaches.

Let me give a couple of hypothetical illustrations to clarify my concerns. Suppose a group of people who believe that Genesis teaches young earth creationism began to interpret Darwin's *Origin of Species* as actually teaching or supporting young earth creationism.

6 Higgins, 'Identity', 36.

This group then starts using Darwin as a witnessing tool to tell others that one of the great scientific minds of the 19th century actually gives scientific credence to the accuracy of the Genesis account and thus that is one more proof that the Bible is the inspired word of God. And let's assume this group convinces others in their evangelistic approach and people come to faith in Christ. Although as a Christian I would rejoice that people are coming to faith in Christ through this evangelistic approach, I would still insist that this is not an honest reading of Darwin. We cannot read Darwin 'through the interpretive key of the Gospel' and come up with an interpretation of Darwin at odds with how Darwin has been understood by his friends and foes alike within the scientific community for the past 150 years.

Or suppose that an American Christian who attends church regularly, converts to Shi'ite Islam but decides to stay in the church. He decides to reinterpret the Bible 'through the interpretive key of the Qur'an'. He also decides to partake of the Lord's Supper but interprets that as a commemoration of Hussein's martyrdom at Karbala instead of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. Once again, I would say that this individual has every right to convert to Islam but his 'reinterpretation' of the Bible or his 'reinterpretation' of the Lord's Supper is not an honest or legitimate way of understanding the Bible or Christian sacraments.

You might not accept my analogies but as far as I am concerned that is how I view what the above Insiders are doing when they reinterpret the Qur'an to make its message compatible with the Gospel or profess *shahada* as followers

of Christ.⁷ If we disapprove of the re-interpretive activities in my above two examples, as Christians we should also disapprove of the Insiders' reinterpretation of the Qur'an and *shahada*.

VI—Kevin: The case for a Christian reading of the Qur'an is not so unreasonable as to be dishonest

Dear Sasan,

I thank you also for your patience with me in these discussions as I am trying to understand where some of our Insider friends are coming from. This last response and input from you is helping sharpen our focus, and will hopefully clarify where we understand each other better, as well as (in your words) where the real impasses might remain.

When we originally began this discussion, it was framed as a question of integrity: is such a position 'honest'? I took that to mean we were discussing the integrity, the honesty, of Muslims who follow Jesus when they say that Muhammad is a prophet, but express it with different ideas than most Muslims would accept. This is why I used the fact that Muslims in general have many divergent views regarding Muhammad, and that they disagree vehemently in some cases.

But you have made clear in this exchange, that you 'do not mean that folks with this perspective are involved in fraud or deception but that this is not

⁷ I see my analogies as a lot closer to what these Insiders are doing than your reference to Christians reinterpreting pagan festivals, practices, trees, objects or the terms for God throughout the history of the church.

a legitimate or genuine understanding of what the Qur'an claims for itself'. So in my mind we are not discussing integrity after all, but whether such a view is correct or not. Perhaps we are at an impasse as to our views on that question, but could we agree that this is not a question of whether Muslim followers of Jesus are being honest in their views?

As to the question, then, of accuracy, there are several points to make. Your Darwin example is a starting point. You ask whether Darwin could be re-interpreted to promote creationism. Of course one question I would ask your hypothetical evangelists would be to show where in Darwin they find evidence of creationist views? There will be none, as we both know. So surely this is a question of apples (what some believers are saying about the Qur'an) and oranges (the Darwin case).

In the case of the Qur'an, the verses which point to confirming previous books (2:89 and 91), the fact Muhammad is told to resolve questions by turning to those who know the books (10:94), and the various ways Jesus is talked about that do seem far beyond normal Muslim beliefs⁸ could all suggest the sort of reading that some of our Muslim friends are suggesting. In the Darwin case, there is nothing in his books to suggest any sort of alternative reading whatsoever.

You also cite the example of an American Christian who attends church regularly, converts to Shi'ite Islam but decides to stay in the church

and decides to reinterpret the Bible through the interpretive key of the Qur'an. My question would be what has he found in the Bible that suggests using the Qur'an as a key for interpretation? Muslims who follow Jesus, whether you agree with them or not, *have* argued that the Qur'an suggests that the Bible in fact is seen as the key to a right understanding of the Qur'an.

This is a good place to re-emphasize something, and I will use a quote from you, taking a quote from me, to do so. You cite my summarization, the sort of thing I have heard some Muslim followers of Jesus say about how they see the Bible and the Qur'an:

...I read the Quran through the interpretive key of the Gospel and the previous books. When I read the Quran through that lens and filter I find that it agrees with the Bible...

This statement is fundamentally different from your two examples. I would actually agree with your conclusion, regarding the two examples you cited: those two could represent positions that, although they might be honestly held, are impossible to sustain from the texts in question. The way that some Muslims who follow Jesus view the Qur'an and use it to sustain their views is very different. As such, while you, as well as other Muslims, may disagree with their interpretation, I would argue it is a position that can be held with integrity and conviction.

Whether this is a statement that can be sustained, or not, is an important discussion. You and I will probably never see it eye to eye. But our discussion seems at least to have allowed us to agree that it is not a question of integrity. This still leaves, certainly, a

⁸ Verses which seem pregnant with deeper hints of Jesus' nature when read by 'insider believers' in the light of the New Testament could include 3:45, 5:110 as many others.

question of whether such a view is correct or not. This leads me to conclude by restating my previous point that whether Muslim followers of Jesus are correct in their views of Muhammad and the Qur'an or not is a matter for Muslims to determine.

VII Sasan: The IM approach is not legitimate or truthful

Dear Kevin,

Greetings my dear friend. As we are wrapping up our conversation, let me end with some clarifications and re-statements of the convictions that I have tried to communicate.

I don't think our fundamental disagreements come down to our different understandings of the word 'honest'. According to my Merriam-Webster electronic dictionary, the first definition of the adjective 'honest' is, 'free from fraud or deception: legitimate, truthful'. I have never intended to judge the hearts and motives of all IM advocates or declare them deceitful people. But I still believe the IM approach to the Qur'an and the acknowledgement of *shahada* is not a legitimate or truthful interpretation of those texts as those texts have been understood by Muslims for 1400 years.

As Kevin Vanhoozer points out, there are ethical dimensions involved in interpreting texts (what he calls 'the morality of literary knowledge') and there are times when we can be guilty of 'interpretive violence'. Vanhoozer asks, 'Is it possible that some interpretive methods legitimate misunderstanding?'⁹ So I maintain

that IM interpretive methods promote a misunderstanding of these texts and thus should not be held by followers of Jesus.

I truly appreciate your clear response to my hypothetical analogies. It put my mind at ease that our IM brothers had not given up on all distinctions between 'exegesis' and 'eisegesis'. You agree that it is not legitimate to get an interpretation in support of young earth creationism out of Darwin's *Origin of Species*. But you go on to say, 'In the case of the Qur'an, the verses which point to confirming previous books (2:89 and 91), the fact Muhammad is told to resolve questions by turning to those who know the books (10:94), and the various ways Jesus is talked about that do seem far beyond normal Muslim beliefs could all suggest the sort of reading that some of our Muslim friends are suggesting'.

I maintain that such IM interpretations are based on highly selective readings of the Qur'an that take certain passages of the Qur'an out of the entire Qur'anic context and thus distort the totality of the Qur'anic message as it has been understood by Muslims throughout their history.

It also seems that you are fine with followers of Jesus reading the Qur'an through the interpretive key of the gospel but do not see any legitimacy in a Muslim reading the Bible through the interpretive key of the Qur'an. You ask, 'What has he [my hypothetical convert to Islam] found in the Bible that suggests using the Qur'an as a key for interpretation?' I would say that just as

9 Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This*

Text? (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 161.

you used Acts 17 in earlier parts of our discussion to justify your approach to the Qur'an, a Muslim can find plenty of resources within the Qur'an to justify looking at the Bible from the interpretive key of the Qur'an. For example, the Qur'an indicates that the Torah and Jesus predicted the coming of Muhammad.

So from the earliest times, Muslims have 'found' many prophecies in the OT and the NT concerning the coming of Muhammad. I believe that in the same way that you and I believe those Muslim interpretations of such biblical 'prophecies' are not legitimate exegesis of our Scriptures, Muslims also believe that the IM approach to interpret the Qur'an through the Gospels is an illegitimate approach to their text.

So a book that has been consistently understood and interpreted by almost every Muslim and non-Muslim alike (up until our modern IM controversy) as a text that explicitly repudiates the core of the Christian faith in regard to such foundational truths as the Triune identity of God, the deity of Christ and his atoning death on the cross, cannot be all of a sudden interpreted as a text that supports the Christian views of Jesus, God and salvation. Because of such foundational contradictions with the Bible, we as Christians should not view this as a work inspired by God and the man who brought this message claiming to have received it directly from God could not be viewed by Christians as in any way having been commissioned by God. This is not just a question for Muslims to decide on. This is an issue that should engage all who care about the truth.

VIII—Kevin: Not a question of dishonesty, but of exegesis

Dear Sasan,

Thank you again for this series of discussions. While I think we might get further doing this over coffee, at least in this format others have been able to listen in.

I appreciate your clarification about referring to IM opinions as dishonest. Though you are not questioning 'the hearts and motives of all IM advocates' and you do not intend to 'declare them as deceitful people', you do not see their views as honest: you do not believe their interpretations of the Qur'an are 'a legitimate and truthful interpretation of those texts as those texts have been understood by Muslims for 1400 years'. It seems fair to say that you believe they are dishonest, but not deceitful.

You are then using the word 'dishonest' in the way I would use the word 'incorrect'. I think this is a rare use of the word. Most readers seeing 'dishonest' will assume you mean, well, deceitful.

Now, whether IM positions are correct or not is a perfectly acceptable and important conversation. But to be frank, when you critique my friends as being dishonest it takes the conversation to a very different place. I felt it was important to clear that point before proceeding. But having done so, and assuming we agree my friends are sincere, let us proceed to talk about whether or not their position is correct.

You state that, 'IM interpretations are based on highly selective readings of the Qur'an that take certain passages of the Qur'an out of the entire Qur'anic context'. We are still faced

with space limits, but let me say a few things.

First, there is much more than a few isolated verses to the argument that the Qur'an took expression as a confirmation and interpretation of the previous books, and is best read and interpreted in their light. Further, when read with a prior assumption that the Bible interprets the Qur'an, many of the verses in the Qur'an that seem to disagree with the biblical message are seen in a different light. Third, I am not suggesting that every verse or idea in the Qur'an *does* match the Bible, even when it is read in the Bible's light.

However, my own opinion is that there is more truth in the Qur'an than many of its critics think. My IM friends would give you very different answers, from each other, if they could enter the discussion here. Some of them would agree with you that there are things wrong in the Qur'an. Others would argue that those things that seem wrong are not wrong once they are interpreted in the light of the Bible.

That brings me to your important question about reading the Bible through the eyes of the Qur'an, and your point that Muslims have long found 'many prophecies in the OT and the NT concerning the coming of Muhammad'. You point out that this is a faulty reading of our Bible, and draw a parallel to IM readings of the Qur'an.

I agree with you of course that the Muslim reading of the Bible you mention is at fault. However, is it at fault because it differs from Christian interpretation, or is it at fault because when one goes to the supposed prophetic references in the Bible that Muslims take to refer to Muhammad, and when one studies those in their original context, etc., one finds that the exegesis does not hold up? That exegesis is not right simply because Christians say it is. It is right because it is right, exegetically.

That is what I would suggest should be the test of IM interpretations of the Qur'an. Their reading of the Qur'an is right or wrong, in the end, not based upon whether it agrees with standard Muslim opinion, but with thoughtful exegesis of the passages in question.

Such exegesis may well prove that standard understanding of some texts has been wrong. That is at least a possibility. And likewise, it may prove that in at least some cases my IM friends are wrong. That is also possible.

In conclusion, to return to where we began this last set of exchanges, being wrong is not the same as being dishonest. And, I would argue, the exegetical discussions about what the verses in question in the Qur'an really mean are in fact discussions for the Muslim community to wrestle with, including those Muslims who have come to believe in Jesus as Lord and Saviour.