

THE INCARNATION: MUSLIM OBJECTIONS AND THE CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

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Introduction: Christian-Muslim Dialogue and the Incarnation

AS THE TWO largest religions in the world, Christianity and Islam cannot help but encounter each other. In the last two decades, several important steps have been made by Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox Christians to engage in meaningful dialogue with members of the Islamic faith.¹ While sincerity, mutual respect and good will are all in evidence in these efforts to dialogue, it also is clear that an authentic theological discussion between Christians and Muslims cannot help but arouse a certain degree of tension over the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. In my own experience in dialogue with Muslims,² there seems to emerge a point in which discussion of Jesus the prophet vs. Jesus the Incarnate Word of God will inevitably take place. Such discussions can prove to be stimulating and educational. However, they tend to go best when there is an honest and open acknowledgement of the differences that exist between

¹ A good summary of Catholic and Protestant efforts can be found in John Renard, "Christian-Muslim Dialogue: A Review of Six Post-Vatican II, Church-Related Documents," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 23:1, Winter, 1986: 69-89. On the Orthodox Christian dialogue with Muslims, see *Orthodox Christians and Muslims*, ed. N. M. Vapori (Brookline, Mass.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1986).

² I have visited Saudi Arabia and Bahrain as a Joseph J. Malone Fellow with the National Council of U.S.-Arab Relations, and I was a member of the Christian-Muslim Dialogue Commission of the Austin Metropolitan Ministries in Austin, Texas.

the two traditions. As Georges Anawati, a Catholic Islamicist, notes: "As a starting point, dialogue requires respect for the identity of the other. It does not ignore obvious differences . . . for to do so would be of no use for either friendship or truth."³ A Muslim scholar, Professor Mohammed Talbi of the University of Tunis, likewise remarks that "the more one is firm about the classical aspects of divergence, the better the contacts between Christians and Muslims."⁴

At issue in the Christian-Muslim discussion of the Incarnation is the unique character of each faith. In Islam, there is the absolute affirmation of divine unity (*tawhid*) which necessarily condemns any attempt to associate something other than God with God (*shirk*). Christianity, though, has as one of its central tenets the affirmation that the uncreated Word of God (*ho logos*) became flesh (*sarx*) in Jesus (John 1:14). Islam, therefore, presents a unique challenge to the Christian theologian. Is it possible to formulate a Christology which can affirm the Islamic principle of *tawhid* and evade the accusation of *shirk* without compromising the core of the Christian message? This is the question this article hopes to address.

One suggestion for Christians in dialogue with Muslims is given by Hans Küng in his book *Christianity and the World Religions*.⁵ Küng believes that Christians would do best to go back to the mindset of the original Jewish Christians who possessed an understanding of Jesus which is much more compatible with the Qur'anic view of Jesus as the "servant of God."⁶ While Küng's suggestion is helpful for Christians who are looking for an analogy to the Islamic view of Jesus, I find it problematical for several reasons. Küng seems to suggest that the Jesus of history (as

³ Georges Anawati, O.P., "An Assessment of the Christian-Islamic Dialogue," in *The Vatican, Islam and the Middle East*, ed. Kail Ellis, O.S.A. (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1987), p. 59.

⁴ Ibid., p. 65.

⁵ Hans Küng, *Christianity and the World Religions: Paths of Dialogue with Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism*, trans. Peter Heinegg (New York: Doubleday, 1986), pp. 109-130.

⁶ Ibid., p. 122.

well as the Jesus of the New Testament) is quite separate from the Christ of the ecumenical councils. Such an assertion, though, does not find support from many Christian theologians and biblical scholars (not to mention church authorities).⁷ Moreover, Küng appears to have an ambivalence regarding the normative status of the ecumenical councils for Christians. On the one hand, he states that "he can accept the truth of the great Christological councils from Nicea to Chalcedon" (p. 127), yet he scolds the Hellenistic Church for its suppression of the Ebionites who did not go along with its "increasingly exaggerated Christology" (p. 123). Which Christology does Küng accept: that of the Ebionites or that of the Hellenistic Church (i.e. Nicea and Chalcedon)? I agree with Küng that the Christology of the Qur'an is closer to *some* preconiliar understandings of Christ. However, if Christians are to have dialogue with Muslims today, they should be willing to present their faith in all its fullness.

My own position is that Christian dialogue with Muslims cannot take place unless one is willing to be clear about one's beliefs. I understand Nicea and Chalcedon to be normative for Catholic and Orthodox Christianity. I also know that the Symbol of Nicea-Constantinople clearly affirms that Jesus is the "only-begotten Son of God, generated from the Father before all ages, Light from Light, true God from true God" who became "incarnate by the Holy Spirit from the Virgin Mary." These words, I believe, are recited with conviction from the lips of not only Catholics and Orthodox but also those of the Anglican, Methodist, Lutheran and Presbyterian communions. Thus, the Incarnation is a solemn doctrine of the Christian faith and should be presented as such in dialogue with Muslims.

One of the purposes of interreligious dialogue is the attainment of a deepened self-understanding in the light of one's encounter with the viewpoint of another tradition. Dialogue helps to clarify

⁷ For example, Raymond Brown is willing to acknowledge that "there is a solid biblical precedent for calling Jesus God" even though "we must be cautious to evaluate this usage in terms of the New Testament *ambiance*." See Raymond Brown, *Jesus God and Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), p. 38.

the core beliefs of each faith while at the same time establishing points of convergence and divergence. In the case of Christian-Muslim dialogue, discussion of the Incarnation can lead to a clearer understanding of how the two traditions differ and why. Such a dialogue might help Christians come to a deeper appreciation of the Islamic faith through the realization that the Muslim rejection of the Incarnation is based on deeply felt convictions that emerge from theological concerns that Christians also share in common. Such a dialogue might also increase the Muslim respect for the Christian faith through the recognition that the Christian articulation of the Incarnation has always tried to be sensitive to the same theological concerns that cause Muslims to reject the doctrine.

The Qur'anic Rejection of the Incarnation

Probably the most fundamental reason for the Muslim rejection of the Incarnation is that the idea of Jesus' divine filiation appears to be explicitly rejected in the Qur'an. While the Trinity and the Incarnation are the two foundational dogmas of the Christian faith, for Muslims these two teachings are understood as false teachings that threaten divine unity. Thus, we read in the Qur'an: "Say: He is God the One and only; God, the Eternal, Absolute; He begetteth not, nor is he begotten and there is none like unto Him" (112:1-4).⁸ Such a statement seems to be a direct contradiction of the Nicene Creed which speaks of Jesus as "eternally begotten of the Father."

The idea of God begetting a son is rejected in the Qur'an as an affront to the divine majesty: "It is not befitting to (the majesty) of God that he should beget a son" (19:35). Moreover, we are told: "To Him is due the primal origin of the heavens and the earth: How can He have a son when He hath no consort?" (6:101).

⁸ *The Holy Qur'an*, trans. A. Yusuf Ali (Brentwood, Maryland: Anama Corp., 1983), p. 1806. Since all subsequent citations of the Qur'an are taken from Ali's translation, they will henceforth be noted simply by surah and verse.

Christians are also said to be in error when they make the claim of divine filiation: "In blasphemy indeed are those that say that God is Christ the son of Mary. Say: 'Who then hath the least power against God if His Will were to destroy Christ, the son of Mary, his mother and all—everyone that is on earth? For to God belongeth the dominion of the heavens and the earth, and all that is between'" (5:17). The outrage of the Christian heresy is further emphasized: "The Jews call Uzair a son of God, and the Christians call Christ a son of God. This is a saying from their mouth; (In this) they but imitate what the unbelievers of old used to say. God's curse be on them: how they are deluded away from the truth! . . . And (they take as their Lord) Christ the son of Mary; yet they were commanded to worship but one God: there is no God but He. Praise and glory to Him. (Far is He) from having the partners they associate (with Him)" (9:30-31).

Who then was Jesus? The Qur'an makes this clear: "Christ the son of Mary was no more than an apostle; many were the apostles that passed away before him. His mother was a woman of truth. They both had to eat their daily food" (5:75). While the identity of Jesus as the Son of God is rejected, the Qur'an testifies to the uniqueness and importance of Jesus by the recognition of his birth to the Virgin Mary (3:47), his working of miracles (by God's leave), and his mysterious ascension to God in heaven (3:55 and 4:158). Probably the most famous Qur'anic teaching on Jesus is found in 4:171: "O People of the Book! Commit no excesses in your religion: nor say of God aught but the truth. Christ Jesus the son of Mary was (no more than) an apostle of God, and His Word, which He bestowed on Mary and a Spirit proceeding from Him: so believe in God and His apostles. Say not 'Trinity': desist: It will be better for you. For God is only one God: Glory be to Him: (Far Exalted is He) above having a son."

The Qur'an also seems to assert that Jesus never claimed to be divine or to demand worship from his followers:

And behold! God will say: "O Jesus the son of Mary! Didst thou say unto men; worship me and my mother as gods in degradation of God?" He will say: "Glory to Thee! Never could I say what I had no right (to say). Had I said such a thing, Thou wouldst indeed have known it. Thou knowest what is in my heart, though I know not what is in Thine. For Thou knowest in full all that is hidden. Never said I to them aught except what Thou didst command me to say, to wit, 'Worship God, my Lord and your Lord;' and I was a witness over them whilst I dwelt amongst them when Thou didst take me up, thou wast the Watcher over them, and Thou are a witness to all things" (5:116-117).

In the Qur'an, therefore, Jesus is understood to be an important apostle or messenger (*rasul*) sent to the children of Israel to bring the Gospel which contains "guidance and light" (5:46). His miraculous birth from the Virgin Mary shows him to be of similtude to Adam who was likewise created by the divine command: "Be" (3:59). The Qur'an also seems to deny Jesus' death by crucifixion: "But they killed him not nor crucified him, but so it was made to appear to them" (4:157). A common interpretation of this text is that God would not allow a prophet as great as Jesus to suffer such a horrible death. Jesus plays an important role as a messenger who confirms the Law which precedes him yet predicts the coming of an apostle after him named "Ahmed" (61:6).

While the followers of Jesus are said to have "compassion and mercy in their hearts," there are also among them many "rebellious transgressors" (57:27). This might help to explain the ambivalence of the Qur'an towards Christians. On the one hand, Christians are said to be nearest to the believers (Muslims) in love because among them are "men devoted to learning and men who have renounced the world, and they are not arrogant" (5:82). On the other hand, Muslims are warned not to take Jews and Christians as "friends and protectors" since "they are but friends and protectors of each other" (5:51). While Christians are given stern warnings about excesses in religion (e.g. 4:171 and 9:30-31), they are also given an apparent assurance of salvation if they but believe in God, the last day and do good deeds (2:62 and 5:69).

*Rejection of the Incarnation in the Muslim
Theological Tradition*

As we have seen, the Qur'an rejects the belief of the Incarnation because such a doctrine threatens the majesty and unity of God and also because Jesus never claimed to be anything other than God's servant and messenger. The question, of course, needs to be raised as to whether the Qur'an accurately portrays the Christian dogma of the Incarnation and whether what it condemns is the orthodox Christian understanding of Jesus as the Incarnate Word. What can be said for now, though, is that even when Muslims came in contact with Christians and became more conversant with Christian points of view, they continued to resist the whole notion of the Incarnation.⁹ In a debate between the Syrian, Mar Timothy (the Patriarch of Antioch) and the Caliph Mahdi held in 781, the Caliph shows an awareness of the Trinity as Father, Son and Spirit rather than as God, Jesus and Mary as the Qur'an might suggest.¹⁰ In this same debate, Timothy also clearly explains to the Caliph the Christian understanding of the Incarnation as one person with two natures, a divine nature which belongs to the Eternal Word and a human nature taken from Mary. The Caliph, though, responds by repeating the Qur'anic assertions that God cannot beget a son and that Jesus is only a "servant of God."¹¹

Although Christian presentations of Orthodox formulations of the Trinity and the Incarnation did not prevent Muslims from rejecting these Christian doctrines, such discussions helped to spawn subsequent Islamic controversies over the reality of the divine attributes and the uncreated Qur'an.¹² In a fictional debate between a Christian and a Muslim composed by John of

⁹ Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp. 310-311.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 311. The full text of this debate can be found in "The Apology of Timothy before the Caliph Mahdi," trans. and ed. Alphonse Mingana in *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, Manchester, England (Jan. 1928): 137-298.

¹¹ See Surah 4:171 and 19:30.

¹² See Wolfson, pp. 234-354.

Damascus in the mid-eighth century, the Christian "is advised to wrest from the Muslim the admission that Jesus is called in the Koran (4:169, 171) the Word (*kalimah*) in the sense of the pre-existent Christ, just as the Koran is called in it the Word of God in the sense of a pre-existent Koran."¹³ While John of Damascus asserts that the denial of the uncreated Qur'an is heretical for Muslims, it is also clear that some Muslims argued against the uncreatedness of the Qur'an by comparing this doctrine to the Christian claim that "Jesus the son of Mary was not created (*mahluk*) because he was the Word of God."¹⁴

This internal Muslim controversy over the uncreatedness of the Qur'an, though, did not make Muslims any more sympathetic to the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. It is clear from the writings of John of Damascus that Christians were called associators (*al-mushrikun*) by their Muslim opponents in Syria.¹⁵ The basic argument was that Christians associate another god with God by claiming that Christ is the son of God.¹⁶ This was understood to be a violation of the strict warning in the Qur'an: "O my son! Join not in worship (others) with God: for false worship is indeed the highest wrongdoing" (31:13).

While the appeal to the Qur'an remains central in Islamic polemics against Christian doctrines, it is also apparent that some Muslims have preferred to take a more apologetic approach in dealings with their Christian neighbors. This is the case with Al-Hashimi, who writes an apologetic discourse (c. 820) designed to attract Christians to the truth of Islam. Al-Hashimi states that he is writing in a spirit of peace and affection.¹⁷ He then proceeds to show that he is familiar with both the Old and New

¹³ Ibid., p. 242. The text of John of Damascus is called *Disputatio Saraceni et Christiani* (PG 96, 1341).

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 240-242. The words are those of Caliph Ma'mun (786-833).

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 243 and 318-319. See also St. John of Damascus "On Heresies" in *St. John of Damascus: Writings*, trans. F. H. Chase (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1958), p. 155.

¹⁶ Surah 9:30.

¹⁷ Georges Anawati, "Polémique, apologie et dialogue Islamo-Chrétiens: positions classiques, médiévales et positions contemporaines, *Euntes Docete* 22 (1969): 380-381.

Testaments as well as the three major Christian confessions: the Melkites, the Jacobites and the Nestorians. Rather than begin with a direct attack upon Christian beliefs, Al-Hashimi prefers instead to outline the strong points of Islam: strict monotheism, the examples of Abraham and Muhammad, the discipline of the five pillars and the peace of heart that it brings. This irenic tone, though, is soon broken by a string of accusations he applies to his opponent. Thus, he states that Christians are guilty of infidelity (*kufr*), error (*dalal*), wickedness (*shaqarwa*) and calamity (*bala*) by their persistence in calling God Father, Son and Spirit and in "adoring the cross."¹⁸ He also is amazed that Christians can actually believe in something "so vile (*khasasa*) as to affirm the divinity of Christ."¹⁹

There is also another aspect to Al-Hashimi's polemic against Christianity which deserves mention. This is the claim that the Christian scriptures have undergone alteration or corruption (*tahrif*).²⁰ By this accusation of *tahrif*, Al-Hashimi and many subsequent Muslims have been able to undercut any attempt by Christians to appeal to the New Testament as proof for the Incarnation or the divinity of Christ. For Muslims, the Qur'an is a more reliable source about the truth of Jesus' identity than the New Testament.²¹

During the ninth century, Muslim polemics against the Christian doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation begin to

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 382.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ This aspect of Al-Hashimi's polemic is clear from the strong defense of the integrity of the New Testament by his Christian respondent, al-Kindi. It is interesting to note that Kindi levels the same accusation of corruption against the Qur'an. See Ibid., p. 391.

²¹ While Muslims acknowledge the divine origin of the Gospel (*Injil*) revealed to and taught by the historical Jesus, they frequently assert that the Gospel spoken of in the Qur'an is not the same as the four Gospels of the New Testament. See appendix III in Yusuf Ali's edition of the Qur'an, p. 287 where it is stated that the *Injil* of the Qur'an "is not the four Gospels now received as canonical". Most Muslims, though, believe that the Gospels of the New Testament contain some elements of the true *Injil* and many true teachings of Jesus. On this question, though, there seem to be varying Muslim opinions.

take on a new aspect: that of logical refutation. Muslims during the reign of the Caliph Ma'mun (813-833) show a familiarity with the logical writings of Aristotle. Thus, the Muslim philosopher al-Kindi (d. 873) makes use of both the *Metaphysics* and the *Topics* of Aristotle in his attempt to show the logical inconsistency of the Christian Trinity.²² Kindi's basic argument is that the three persons or hypostases of the Trinity are understood to be individuals (*ashhas*) which have properties peculiar to each. Such a distinction between properties implies composition and anything composed cannot be eternal. Hence, the three persons of the Trinity cannot be eternal yet they are asserted to be eternal by Christians. This reveals a logical inconsistency in the doctrine of the Trinity.

Needless to say, Christians attempted to answer these charges of logical inconsistency by means of their own apologetics and logic. For example, the Christian Yahya Ibn 'Adi (d. 974) argues that the Trinity does not involve any logical contradiction since God "is said to be 'one' from one point of view (*jihah*) or aspect (*wajh*), that is to say with reference to 'substance,' and He is said to be 'three' from another point of view or aspect, that is to say, with reference to 'hypostases.'"²³ Another Christian who defended his faith in response to Islamic criticisms was the Melkite bishop Paul of Antioch (fl. c. 1140-1180).²⁴ In his "Letter to Some Muslim Friends" written in Arabic, Paul shows a thorough understanding of the Qur'an as well as the Islamic objections to Christian teachings. Of the Muslim theologians who wrote responses to this letter, probably the most notable is Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328).

The theology of Ibn Taymiyya is very important in the history of Islam. Although a member of a Sufi order, Ibn Taymiyya is

²² Wolfson, pp. 320-327.

²³ Ibid., p. 327.

²⁴ On Paul of Antioch, see *A Muslim Theologian's Response to Christianity: Ibn Taymiyya's Al-Jawab Al-Sahih*, trans. and ed. Thomas F. Michel, S.J. (Delmar, N.Y.: Caravan Books, 1984) and Muzammil H. Siddiqi, "Muslim and Byzantine Christian Relations: Letter of Paul of Antioch and Ibn Taymiyyah's Response," in *Orthodox Christians and Muslims*, ed. N.M. Vaporis (Brookline, Mass.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1986), pp. 33-45.

well-known as an opponent of what he understood to be unorthodox Sufism and philosophy.²⁵ Thus, in his massive polemic against Christianity entitled “The correct answer to those who changed the religion of Christ (*Al-Jawab al Sahih li Man Baddal Din al-Masih*)”, Ibn Taymiyya not only points out the errors of the Christian dogmas of the Trinity and the Incarnation but also the errors of the Muslim extremists found among the Sufis and the philosophers. His overriding concern, of course, is to preserve the true message of the prophets of the unity and transcendence of God. In his theological language, Ibn Taymiyya tries to achieve balance and truth in support of authentic piety. His effort, as Thomas Michel S.J. explains, is

to achieve *tanzih* (proper expression of divine transcendence) without *ta'til* (exaggeration of divine transcendence which denies divine contact with the universe), *tamthil* (proper expression of divine immanence) without *tashhih* (an understanding of divine immanence which makes God essentially united with or dependent upon the created universe), personal devotional piety without *hulul* (the indwelling of God in a human person), *ittihad* (union or identification of God with either a created being or the universe), or *mulamasa* (intermingling of God in creation or in a created person).²⁶

Ibn Taymiyya's polemic against Christianity is not simply a response to Paul of Antioch but also an apology in defense of the superiority of Islam. In this respect, he argues that Judaism is essentially a religion of the law based on justice (*'adl*) and Christianity is essentially a religion of grace based on charity (*fadl*). Judaism and Christianity by themselves are incomplete. Islam is the most perfect of the three religions because it combines law and justice with grace and charity.²⁷ Ibn Taymiyya also insists, against the arguments of Paul of Antioch, that Muhammad's prophetic role is foretold in both the Old and New Testaments and that his prophethood is confirmed by numerous miracles.²⁸

²⁵ *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: MacMillan, 1987), S.v. “Ibn Taymiyah,” by George Makdisi. the glossary, pp. 455-459.

²⁶ Michel, p. 3. The explanation of these Arabic terms is given by Michel in

²⁷ See Siddiqi, pp. 44-45 and Michel, pp. 351-369.

²⁸ Siddiqi, pp. 44-45; Michel, pp. 173-181.

In his rejection of the Incarnation, Ibn Taymiyya repeats the familiar Muslim accusation of *shirk*²⁹ and argues that Christians cannot prove the Incarnation from their scriptures because of their alteration of original texts (*tahrif al-lafz*) and their incorrect interpretations of the present texts (*tahrif al-ma'na*).³⁰ To these accusations of *shirk* and *tahrif*, he adds the errors of *hulul* (divine indwelling) and *ittihad* (union of God and a created thing).

Ibn Taymiyya argues that it is possible to speak of *hulul* in the sense of divine intimacy and love without eliminating the essential distinction between Creator and creature. As he writes:

By *hulul*, rather is meant the presence of faith in God and knowledge of Him, love and remembrance of him, worship of Him, His light and His guidance. This may be expressed as an indwelling of the intellective representation (*al-mithal al-'ilmi*) as is mentioned in the Qur'an (6:3, 30:28). To God belong the highest representations in the hearts of the dwellers in the heavens and the dwellers of earth.³¹

Ibn Taymiyya has no problem with the experience of God's nearness as long as a clear distinction is made between the divine essence and our own. Likewise, he believes that it is possible to speak of a union with God in will and action in the sense that "the believer only desires what God desires, only hates what He hates, only does what He commands etc."³² This is union with God in the metaphorical sense and not in the literal sense of essentialistic identity. Ibn Taymiyya points out passages in both the Bible and the Qur'an which suggest *hulul* and *ittihad*.³³ He maintains, though, that these passages must be understood in the proper sense. In no way can they be used in support of the divinity of Christ since the same language of divine indwelling is used for others besides Jesus.³⁴

²⁹ Michel, pp. 245-246.

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 113-115 and 213-217.

³¹ Quoted in Ibid., p. 126.

³² Ibid., p. 126.

³³ Ibid., pp. 288-301 and 323-324.

³⁴ This point is most clearly stated in Ibid., p. 299.

Ibn Taymiyya accuses both Christians and Muslim Sufis like Al-Hallaj and Al-Tilimsani of incorrectly understanding the meanings of *hulul* and *ittihad*.³⁵ His polemic is equally strong against those philosophers like Ibn Arabi who propose a system of *wahdat al-wujud* (the affirmation of the principle of the unity of existence).³⁶ According to Ibn Taymiyya, true *tawhid* demands a denial of any imperfections in God as well as the affirmation of the radical dissimilarity of God to creation. Christians violate true *tawhid* by their assertion of the specific union (*ittihad khass*) of the uncreated God with the human being Jesus. Some misguided Sufis are also guilty of erroneous *ittihad* by claiming that God unites with certain holy individuals like Al-Hallaj. Even worse than the Christians, though, are those Sufis and philosophers who claim a general union (*ittihad 'amm*) of God with the whole universe. Thus, Ibn Taymiyya's harshest criticism is directed against people like Al-Tilimsani, who maintain that the divine presence should not be recognized simply in some individuals and objects but in everything.³⁷ According to Ibn Taymiyya, both these heretical Muslims as well as the Christians compromise divine unity and transcendence by their erroneous understandings of *hulul* and *ittihad*.

The arguments of theologians like Ibn Taymiyya are still discernable in contemporary Muslim polemics against the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. For example, in a popular book published by the International Islamic Federation of Student Organizations entitled *Islam and Christianity*,³⁸ we find the familiar accusation of *tahrif* in the New Testament (pp. 1-8), the claim that the New Testament predicts the coming of Muhammad (pp. 13-14), the assertion that Biblical texts have been misunderstood by Christians (p. 30 and pp. 35-41), the use of Qur'anic texts to refute the Trinity and the Incarnation (pp. 33-34 and 38-41) and

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 8-14.

³⁶ Ibid., pp. 5-8.

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 8-9.

³⁸ Mrs. Ulfat Asiz-us-Samad, *Islam and Christianity* (Safat, Kuwait: Sahaba Islamic Press, 1405A.H./1985 A.D.)

the apologetic in defense of the superiority of the Islamic religion (pp. 54-90). This text also makes an appeal to common-sense reason to recognize that the Incarnation violates the perfection of God:

Reason refuses to accept a man who was born of a woman, suffered from human wants, ignorance and limitations, and gradually grew in stature, power and wisdom like all other human beings, as God. To put human limitations upon God and to believe in His incarnation in a human body is to deny the perfection of God.³⁹

This text goes on to suggest that the doctrine of the Incarnation was taken over from paganism and pre-Christian mythologies with specific mention of Hinduism and its belief in "Rama and Krishna as incarnations of Vishnu, the second person of the Hindu Trinity."⁴⁰

Among Muslim scholars of today, we also find an echo of many of the traditional objections to the Incarnation as well as some interesting speculations. Fazlur Rahman, for example, repeats the Qur'anic passages dealing with Jesus and concludes that "the unacceptability of Jesus' divinity and the Trinity is incontrovertible, as is the fact that Jesus and his followers are regarded as exceptionally charitable and self-sacrificing."⁴¹ Rahman goes on to explain that the "Qur'an would most probably have no objections to the Logos having become flesh if the Logos were not simply identified with God and the identification were understood less literally."⁴² From what Rahman says here, it seems as if Islam could be compatible with an Arian Christology—though not the Christology of Nicea, Constantinople, Ephesus and Chalcedon.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr likewise restates the Qur'anic objections to the Trinity and the Incarnation but goes on to give a more

³⁹ Ibid., p. 38.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Fazlur Rahman, "The People of the Book and the Diversity of 'Religions,'" in *Christianity Through Non-Christian Eyes*, ed. Paul J. Griffiths (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990), p. 109.

⁴² Ibid.

philosophical explanation for the Islamic resistance to these dogmas. As he writes:

Since Islam is based on the Absolute and not its manifestations and seeks to return Abrahamic monotheism to its original purity as the religion of the One, any emphasis upon a particular manifestation of the One in the direction of the many is seen by Islam as a veil cast upon the plenary reality of *Divine Unity* which Islam seeks to assert so categorically and forcefully. Therefore, the trinitarian doctrine . . . is rejected by the Islamic perspective . . . Likewise, the idea of a Divine Descent in the form of an *incarnation* is excluded from the Islamic point of view.⁴³

While Nasr clearly rejects the traditional orthodox understanding of the Trinity, he is willing to speculate that Islam could accept an interpretation of the Trinity "which would consider the persons of the Trinity to be "aspects" or "Names" of God standing below His Essence which, being the Absolute, must be One without condition and above all relations."⁴⁴ Understood in Christian theological language, this seems to suggest that Islam could be compatible with various Trinitarian formulations that came to be understood as heretical or inadequate: namely, Sabellian modalism and Subordinationism.

Nasr's reflections on Christianity bear a strong resemblance to those of Frithjof Schuon, the Swiss philosopher and author of *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (1953). Schuon understands the question of the two natures of Christ to be an attempt to articulate the relationship of the relative to the Absolute. While Nasr's language seems more overtly Islamic, Schuon (even though a convert to Islamic Sufism), is willing to understand Christ "as the Absolute entered into relativity" and an expression of the "Presence" of "the Uncreated Word."⁴⁵

The ability of Nasr and Schuon to develop a positive appreciation (though not complete acceptance) of the doctrine of Incarna-

⁴³ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "The Islamic View of Christianity," in *Christianity Through Non-Christian Eyes*, p. 128.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Frithjof Schuon, *Christianity/Islam: Essays on Esoteric Ecumenism*, trans. G. Polit (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom Books, 1985), p. 64.

tion is due in no small way to their affinity for the mystical side of Islam. We see the same impulse present in another contemporary Muslim scholar, Mahmoud Ayoub. In a talk given in 1989 at the Muslim-Christian Colloquium in Toronto, Ayoub observes:

We may also through the mystical traditions of both our faiths see the actual role of Jesus—and I would say, in that sense, of prophets and friends of God, in both faiths—that the word of God, the character of God, becomes revealed in the life of an individual in order to raise us to a divine level of living, of thinking, of being. Here perhaps the Orthodox notion of *theosis* may be helpful: that Jesus who in his supreme way manifested the divine will and power in a human life, also draws us to that level so that we, like him, can become divine.⁴⁶

In another setting, Ayoub compares the role of Jesus as Word of God in Christianity to the role of the Qur'an as Word of God in Islam. While noting that no Muslim has ever asserted that the Qur'an is God, Ayoub nevertheless observes that the Christian assertion that "the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14) is parallel to the Muslim belief that "the eternal Qur'an was made a book and entered into our time and history."⁴⁷ In both cases there is the expression of the humanity of God's revelation.

Ayoub, Schoun and Nasr may represent a more mystical side to Islam which can come to a better appreciation of the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation than the more tradition-bound position of Ibn Taymiyya. In this sense, they echo the insight of the Persian mystic Sa'd ud Din Mahmud Shabistari (c. 1250-1320) who in his *Mystic Rose Garden* writes:

⁴⁶ Mahmoud Ayoub, "Divine Revelation and the Person of Jesus Christ," lecture given at the Muslim-Christian Colloquium, March 31-April 2, 1989 in Toronto, Canada, transcribed and reprinted in the *Newsletter of Christian-Muslim Relations*, No. 43 (July, 1990): 4-5.

⁴⁷ Mahmoud Ayoub, "The Word of God in Islam," in *Orthodox Christians and Islam*, p. 73.

In Christianity the end I see is purification from self, deliverance from the yoke of bondage. The blessed portal of Unity is the sanctuary of the soul, which is the nest of the Everlasting—the Simurg. This doctrine was taught by God's spirit (Jesus), who proceeded from the Blessed Spirit.⁴⁸

Traditional Christian Attitudes Toward Islam

The history of Christian responses to the challenge of Islam manifests two basic approaches: the polemical and the irenic. In the category of the polemical, we can locate thinkers like John of Damascus (c. 652-749), Niketas of Byzantium (842-912), Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), and Ludovico Maracci (1612-1700). In the irenic tradition, mention can be made of Paul of Antioch (fl. c. 1140-1180), Hildebrand (Pope Gregory VII from 1073-1085), Ramon Marti (c. 1220-1286), Ramon Lull (c. 1232-1316), and Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464).⁴⁹ In the twentieth century, the great Catholic Islamicists—Louis Massignon (1883-1962) and Miguel Asin Palacios (1871-1944)—also express an irenic approach towards Islam.

The polemical approach taken by Christians towards Islam has traditionally revolved around five major points: 1) the falsity of Muhammad as a prophet, 2) the vilification of Muhammad's character by accusations of sensuality and violence, 3) the falsity of the Qur'an as Scripture, 4) the doctrinal falsity of Islam, and 5) the superiority of the Christian religion. Thus, in Book One, chapter 6, sec. 4 of his *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Thomas Aquinas states that Muhammad "seduced the people by promises of carnal pleasure" and that his teachings "gave free rein to carnal pleasure." The teachings (*documenta*) of Muhammad's religion are such "as could be grasped by the natural ability of anyone with a very modest wisdom (*mediocriter sapiente*)." To whatever truths Muhammad taught, he intermixed "many fables and

⁴⁸ Sa'd ud Din Mahmud Shabistari, *Gulsham I Raz: The Mystic Rose Garden*, trans. E. H. Whinfield (London, Trubner & Co., 1880), p. 78.

⁴⁹ I am indebted to Prof. José Pereira of Fordham University for help in compiling this list as well as for many other helpful suggestions for writing this article.

doctrines of the greatest falsity (*multis fabulis et falsissimus doctrinis immiscuit*).” Moreover, Muhammad “did not bring forth any signs in a supernatural way, which alone fittingly gives witness to divine inspiration.” Instead, Muhammad claimed to be “sent in the power of arms—which are signs not lacking even to robbers and tyrants (*sed dixit se in armorum potentia missum, quae signa etiam latronibus et tyrannis non desunt*).” There are no “divine pronouncements on the part of preceding prophets” to offer proof of Muhammad’s divine call. In regard to the Qur’an, Aquinas suggests that Muhammad “perverts almost all the testimonies of the Old and New Testaments by making them fabrications of his own.”⁵⁰

While Aquinas embodies the polemical and critical attitude that many medieval Christians had towards Islam,⁵¹ there are examples of a more irenic approach. For example, Pope Gregory VII writes to the king of Morocco in 1076 with the message that charity should especially bind Muslims and Christians because “we believe in and confess one God, though in a different manner, who, as Creator of the ages and governor of this world, we praise and honor every day. For as the Apostle says: ‘He is our peace who has made us both one’” (Eph. 2:14).⁵²

⁵⁰ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith: Summa Contra Gentiles, Book One: God*, trans. Anton Pegis (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1955), p. 73. In some cases, I have slightly altered Pegis’s translation after consulting the Latin text.

⁵¹ Part of the medieval hostility towards Islam might be explained by a Latin translation of the Qur’an which was sponsored by Peter the Venerable (d. 1156) and prepared (c. 1141-1143) by Hermannus Dalmata and Robertus Angligena. This translation was full of inaccuracies and misunderstandings, perhaps due to its hostile intent. See Nicholas Rescher, “Nicholas of Cusa on the Qur’an,” in *Studies in Arabic Philosophy* (Pittsburgh, P.A.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1966), p. 138. No doubt this was the translation of the Qur’an familiar to Aquinas.

⁵² Pope Gregory VII, *Epistolae*, lib. 3, no. 21; PL 148, 451 A. The Latin text reads: “*unum Deum, licet diverso modo, credimus et confitemur, qui cum Creatorem saeculorum et gubernatorem huius mundi quotidie laudamus et veneramur. Nam sicut Apostolos diciti: Ipse est pax nostra qui fecit utraque unum*” (Eph. 2:14).

Further evidence of esteem for Islam among medieval Christians is found in the examples of Ramon Marti and Ramon Lull who made use of the writings of Al Ghazzali and other Sufis in developing their own mystical systems.⁵³ In the late Middle Ages, Nicholas of Cusa developed a method for "sifting" the grain of Christian truth which is to be found in the Qur'an. According to Cusanus, there is one aspect of Muhammad that reflects a man who truly listened to the voice of God and another aspect which reflects a man who wished to advance his own ideas and objectives.⁵⁴ Cusanus also finds the Qur'an to be a work of "genuine religious merit" since it is heavily influenced by both the Old and New Testaments.⁵⁵ However, since the Qur'an goes astray at several critical junctures, it must be judged in the light of the Gospels. Cusanus's basic premise is that "if anything beautiful, true and clear is found in the Qur'an, by necessity, it is a ray of the most luminous Gospel (*si quid pulchri, veri et clari in Alcoran reperitur, necesse est, quod sit radius lucidissimi Evangelii*)."⁵⁶

The twentieth century has seen a breakthrough in Christian-Muslim relations. It is very rare to find Christians talking about Muslims with the polemical harshness of Aquinas or Niketas of Byzantium. Increased contacts with the Muslims as well as the objective study of Islam by Christian scholars have both contributed to this atmosphere of dialogue and respect. Moreover, Christian Islamicists like Massignon and Asin Palacios have won the admiration of not only fellow Christians but Muslims as well. Irenicism seems to be the order of the day, especially in light of the teachings of Vatican II and other ecumenical efforts. However, a distinction should be made between peaceful relations and theological consensus. In regard to the Incarnation, Christians and Muslims will continue to hold to separate interpretations.

⁵³ See Miguel Asin Palacios, *El islam cristianizado: estudio del sufismo a través de las obras de Abenarabi de Murcia*, 2 edición (Madrid: Ediciones Hipertion, 1981), p. 11ff.

⁵⁴ Resher, p. 141.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 142.

⁵⁶ Nicholas of Cusa, *Cribratio Alcorani* (The Sifting of the Qur'an) 1,6. Cited in Ibid., p. 142.

*Christian Responses to the Muslim Objections
to the Incarnation*

In the midst of both the polemical and irenic approaches to Islam, we can discern numerous Christian responses to the Islamic rejection of the Incarnation. For the sake of order, we can concentrate on four Muslim objections and respond to them individually. In doing so, an effort will be made to balance historical responses with contemporary insights. The four Muslim objections to be considered are: 1) the claim that Christians are guilty of *tahrif* (alteration or corruption) by believing in the Incarnation; 2) the assertion that the Incarnation violates the majesty of God; 3) the claim that the Incarnation violates divine unity and transcendence; and 4) the appeal to the Qur'an as a witness against the Incarnation.

1) The Accusation of Tahrif

Paul of Antioch gives one response to the accusation of *tahrif* by an appeal to the Qur'an itself. Here, he points to Qur'anic passages like 14:4, 16:36 and 30:47 which indicate that Christians and Jews have already received a scripture with guidance. Paul argues that the message of Muhammad is redundant for Christians since there has already been sent a messenger to the Christian community.⁵⁷ Moreover, the Qur'an itself indicates that the Gospel is "guidance and light" (5:46). Paul also points out that if Muslims claim that the New Testament is a corrupted text, the same accusation can be made against the Qur'an which the Muslims now possess.⁵⁸ Paul's final point is that the Christian scriptures have lasted over 700 years and have been translated into 72 languages yet there still is consistent wording.⁵⁹ How would this be possible if the texts have undergone corruption?

Perhaps the most persuasive argument against the accusation of *tahrif* is the lack of a clear indication of this charge in the

⁵⁷ Michel, p. 146.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 220.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 231 and 239.

Qur'an itself. Mahmoud Ayoub admits that "the Qur'an does not give us any suggestion or any clear idea as to what *tahrif* means."⁶⁰ While the Qur'an does warn Christians of excesses in religious practice (e.g. 4:171), it does not appear to state openly that the Gospel preached by Jesus is other than the Gospels that existed among Christians during the time of Muhammad.⁶¹ In fact, the Qur'an, when speaking about the Gospel, says: "Let the People of the Gospel judge by what God hath revealed therein" (5:47). What Gospel could this be except the Gospel in the possession of the seventh century Christians? The Qur'an does not seem to distinguish between the *Injil* mentioned in 5:46-47 and 7:157 and the four Gospels possessed by Christians as "People of the Gospel." Yet the Qur'an is said to be the "Book explaining all things" (16:89).

The accusation of *tahrif* appears to be based on the premise that the Incarnation and the Trinity are false doctrines and, therefore, any suggestion of them in the Christian scriptures or tradition must be interpreted as *tahrif*. This accusation seems to assume that Christians understand the New Testament in a way parallel to the Muslim appreciation of the Qur'an. However, Catholic, Orthodox and many Protestant Christians do not make an exclusive appeal to scripture alone as the only source of authority in the Christian faith. There is a strong sense of a continuous tradition from the time of Jesus to the present which has preserved the essence of Jesus' true message as well as the foundational experience of the resurrection and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. As Wilfred Cantwell Smith points out: "What corresponds in the Christian scheme to the Qur'an is not the Bible but the person of Christ—it is Christ who is for Christians the revelation of (from) God. And what corresponds to the Bible (the record of revelation) is the Tradition (*hadith*)."⁶²

⁶⁰ Ayoub, "Divine Revelation and the Person of Jesus Christ," p. 2.

⁶¹ In other words, there might be a suggestion of *tahrif al ma'na* (erroneous interpretation) but not *tahrif al-lafz* (textual deformation).

⁶² Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Islam in Modern History* (New York: New American Library, 1957), p. 26.

Paul of Antioch also argues that if Muslims accuse the Christians of *tahrif*, the Christians can make the same accusation against the Qur'an. Just as Christians must rely on faith in maintaining that the Holy Spirit has guided Christian tradition and understanding since the time of Jesus, so Muslims also must depend on faith in asserting the divine origin and infallibility of the Qur'an. We can likewise point to a multi-leveled process of mediation even in the way the Qur'an has been received within the Muslim community: namely, from God to the angel to Muhammad to the hearers to the scribes and finally to the authorized definitive version under the Caliph Uthman (644-656) over a decade after the death of Muhammad.

Since faith is required both for the Christian assertion of the reliability of Scripture and Tradition as well as for Muslim belief in the infallibility of the Qur'an, any attempt to mediate between these two faith claims appears impossible. It is far better to take each tradition on its own terms and discuss central teachings rather than bring the discussion to the level of mutual accusations regarding the authenticity of each other's sources.

2) The Violation of Divine Majesty by the Incarnation

The offense of the idea of the Incarnation to the divine majesty is expressed in several key passages of the Qur'an (e.g. 4:171, 6:101, 9:30-31 and 19:35) which have already been quoted. We have also seen that in popular Islamic literature the argument is made that the Incarnation places human limitations on God and thereby results in a denial of divine perfection. It would seem that many people within the Christian tradition have also struggled with the idea of the Eternal and Omnipotent God becoming a human being and undergoing all the limitations of human existence. This, no doubt, is part of the reason for heterodox movements like Arianism and Nestorianism which sought to keep the divine essence separate from a complete identification (incarnation) with the human.

Even among orthodox Christian theologians, there has been an occasional articulation of the notion of the Incarnation's injury to the divine majesty. For example, the Jesuit theologian Leonardus Lessius (1554-1623) states that, although the Incarnation brings the highest excellence to humanity, "it seems to be with a certain, if I might say so, injury to his (God's) majesty. For it seems to be intrinsically unbecoming that the Creator should become a creature, and the Lord become a slave."⁶³ However, Lessius goes on to say that God would not undergo such "an inconvenience" except for an extrinsic reason that would justify it (i.e. the redemption of humanity from sin and death).

The mainstream tradition of Christian theology, though, has always understood the Incarnation as manifestation of God's love and concern for humanity rather than as an injury to the divine majesty. The New Testament describes the Incarnation as the "true light which enlightens all men" (John 1:9) and the revelation of "grace and truth" (John 1:17). Jesus is seen as the mysterious expression of God's self-emptying love (Phil. 2:6-11), "the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15) and "the refulgence of divine glory" (Heb. 1:3). Nowhere in the New Testament is there the suggestion that God's perfection is threatened by the Incarnation. Quite the contrary, the entrance of God's Son into the world is presented as an expression of redemptive love (John 3:16-17) and divine solidarity with the human condition (Hebrews 4:14-15).

In the *Summa Theologiae*, III, q. 1. Aquinas raises the question: "Whether it was fitting that God should become Incarnate?" Following his systematic method, Aquinas proceeds to raise four objections to the Incarnation which appear to echo Islamic concerns. The first objection is that God has been the very essence of goodness from all eternity. However, from all eternity God had been without flesh. In this sense "it was most

⁶³ Leonardus Lessius, *De Praedestinatione Christi*, n. 13. The Latin text reads: *imo videtur fieri cum quandam, ut sic dicam, iniuria illius Maiestatis. Per se enim indecorum videtur ut Creator fiat creatura, et Deus fiat servus.*

fitting for Him not to be united with flesh. Therefore, it was not fitting for God to become incarnate.”⁶⁴ The second objection states that it is not fitting for things that are infinitely apart to unite. However, “God and flesh are infinitely apart; since God is most simple, and flesh is most composite—especially human flesh. Therefore, it was not fitting that God should be united to human flesh.”⁶⁵ The third objection is that a body is as distant from the highest spirit as evil is from the highest good. Therefore, just as it is unfitting for God as the highest good to assume evil so also “it was not fitting that the highest uncreated spirit assume a body.”⁶⁶ The fourth and final objection to the Incarnation is that “it is not becoming that He Who surpassed the greatest things should be contained in the least . . . it would seem unfitting *He should be hid under the frail body of a babe in swathing bands, in comparison with Whom the whole universe is accounted as little.*”⁶⁷

Aquinas proceeds to answer the initial question by affirming the appropriateness of the Incarnation. His first point is that it seems “most fitting that by visible things the invisible things of God should be made known.”⁶⁸ In support of this claim, he quotes Paul’s Letter to the Romans 1:20: “For the invisible things of God . . . are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made.” Aquinas also quotes the text of John of Damascus (*De Fide Orthod.* iii.1) which states that “by the mystery of the Incarnation are made known at once the goodness, the wisdom, the justice and the power or might of God.”⁶⁹ God’s goodness is made known by His concern for the handiwork of creation. His justice is manifested, since Satan, who caused humanity to fall, is

⁶⁴ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III, q. 1, a 1, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1947), p. 2025.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid. The italicized section comes from a letter written to Augustine by Volusianus.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid., pp. 2025-2026.

defeated by one who is human. His wisdom is shown by finding “a suitable discharge” for the debt of sin. Finally, God’s power is manifested by the Incarnation “since there is nothing greater than for God to become incarnate.”⁷⁰

Aquinas’s second argument is that something is fitting if it belongs to a being by reason of its very nature. Thus, rationality is fitting for human beings who are by nature rational animals. However, “the very nature of God is goodness, as is clear from Dionysius (Div. Nom. i).”⁷¹ This insight into the nature of God as goodness leads Aquinas into the following reflection:

Hence, what belongs to the essence of goodness befits God. But it belongs to the essence of goodness to communicate itself to others in the highest manner to the creature and this is brought about by *His so joining created nature to Himself that one Person is made up of these three—the Word, a soul and flesh*, as Augustine says (*De Trin.* xiii). Hence it is manifest that it was fitting that God should become incarnate.⁷²

In replying to the four objections, Aquinas first points out that the mystery of the Incarnation in no way involves a change in the divine essence through the union of a human nature to the Divine Word. He also explains that “to be united to God in unity of person was not fitting to human flesh, according to its natural endowments, since it was above its dignity; nevertheless, it was fitting that God, by reason of his infinite goodness, should unite it to Himself for man’s salvation.”⁷³ Aquinas also explains that God did not assume “the evil of fault” in becoming incarnate since all that is created is ordained to God’s goodness. Finally, Aquinas responds to the objection that the Incarnation involves an abandonment of the governance of the universe with Augustine’s reply to Volusianus:

The Christian doctrine nowhere holds that God was so joined to human flesh as either to desert or lose, or to transfer and, as it were, contract within this frail body, the care of governing the universe.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 2026.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

This is the thought of men unable to see anything but corporeal things . . . God is great not in mass but in might. Hence the greatness of His might feels no straits in narrow surroundings. Nor, if the passing word of a man is heard at once by many, and wholly by each, is it incredible that the abiding Word of God should be everywhere at once? Hence nothing unfitting arises from God becoming incarnate.⁷⁴

Aquinas also discusses the proper understanding of the Incarnation in Book Four of the *Summa Contra Gentiles*. Here, the union of the divine and human natures in Christ is compared to the union of the human soul with the body. Just as “the body and its parts are the organ of the soul in one fashion” so also the human nature of Christ can be understood as “a kind of organ of the divinity.”⁷⁵ By assuming a human nature, the Divine Word is able to use the Incarnation as the instrumental means to perform “the things that are the proper operation of God alone: to wash away sins . . . to enlighten minds by grace, to lead into the perfection of the eternal life.”⁷⁶ From this Aquinas observes that “the human nature of Christ, then, is compared to God as a proper and conjoined instrument is compared, as the hand is compared to the soul.”⁷⁷

For Aquinas, the intimate union of the divine Word with a human nature is only possible because the human intellect bears “a kinship of likeness” with the Logos. As he explains:

for one should understand that the Word of God was able to be much more sublimely and more intimately united to human nature than the soul to its own very instrument of whatever sort, especially since He is said to be united with the entire human nature with the intellect as medium. And although the Word of God by His power penetrates all things, conserving all, that is, supporting all, it is to intellectual creatures, who can properly enjoy the Word and share with Him, that from a kind of kinship of likeness He can be both more eminently and more ineffably united.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book Four, chap. 4, 11, trans. Charles J. O’Neil (New York: Doubleday, 1957), p. 196.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

The Christian defense of the Incarnation is also based on the premise that the union of a human nature to the Divine Word in no way brings about a diminution of divine power. Indeed, it is only because God is omnipotent that something as marvelous as the Incarnation could occur. The great Baroque theologian, Francisco Suarez (1548-1617), gives lucid expression to this point:

For among the works of divine providence this [the Incarnation] appears to be the greatest, in which, to be sure, the works of nature and grace are conjoined in a marvelous way above all the order of nature, and are almost reduced to a summary. Furthermore, things most distant among themselves, are, in the Incarnation, united in a kind of supreme bond, things like pure actuality and pure potentiality, the highest spirit with the lowest, indeed, with flesh itself; and finally, the Incarnate Person with created nature. The infinite distance between these things not only does not render impossible a joining of and communication between them, but rather magnifies it and manifests the infinite power of Him who could so wonderfully unite in one things so scattered and diverse.⁷⁹

For Christians, the Incarnation is also the perfect expression of divine intimacy and compassion. In both Christian theology and mysticism, there is the sense that the Incarnation is a free expression of the divine love which invites human beings to "share in the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). Rather than a diminution of divine perfection (for how can the divine be diminished?), the Incarnation is the expression and means of human divinization (*theosis*). As Athanasius wrote: "The Word was made man in order that we might be made divine."⁸⁰

3) The Violation of Divine Unity and Transcendence by the Incarnation

Of all the criticisms of the Incarnation, this one is probably most central to the Muslim mind so devoted as it is to the founda-

⁷⁹ Suarez, *De Incarnatione*, commentary on the *Summa theologica*, III q. 1, art. 1, commentarius, n. 9.

⁸⁰ Athanasius, *De Incarnatione*, 54, in *The Early Christian Fathers*, ed. Henry Bettenson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 293.

tional theme of *tawhid* (the affirmation of Divine Unity). The Christian response is that any understanding of the Incarnation which involves a violation of the divine unity and transcendence is as heretical to Christianity as it is to Islam. A close look at the Christian theological formulations of the Incarnation reveals a careful effort to preserve the distinction between the divine nature of the Uncreated Word and the human nature taken from the Virgin Mary. Thus, the Council of Chalcedon (451) states:

We confess that one and the same Lord Jesus Christ, must be acknowledged in two natures, without confusion or change, without division or separation. The distinction between the natures was never abolished by their union but rather the character proper to each of the two natures was preserved as they came together in one person (*prosopon*) and one *hypostasis*.⁸¹

To be sure, the Incarnation is a mystery. However, in defining the parameters of correct understanding, Chalcedon made certain that the divine and the human natures, united in the person of Jesus, would always be seen as “unconfused and unchanged (*in-*

confuse et immutabiliter).” Two years prior to Chalcedon, Pope Leo had written his famous letter to Flavian, the Patriarch of Constantinople, known as the *Tome of Leo*. In this letter, Leo clearly presents the mystery of the Incarnation in such a way as to preserve the true union of the two natures without in any way confusing their distinctions. As he explains:

He who is true God is also true man; there is no falsity in this union, wherein the lowliness of man and the greatness of the divinity are mutually united. Just as God is not changed by His show of mercy, so the man is not swallowed up in majesty. Each aspect performs its own acts in co-operation with the other; that is, the Word doing what is proper to the Word, the flesh pursuing what pertains to the flesh. The first of these is ablaze with the miraculous, the other is overpowered with injuries. And just as the Word does not give up

⁸¹ *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, ed. J. Neuner and J. Dupuis (New York: Alba House, 1982), pp. 154-155.

any of His equality in the Father's glory, so also the flesh does not abandon the nature of our species. He is one and the same, truly Son of God and truly Son of man. He is God because of the fact that 'in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God'; and man through the fact that 'the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.'⁸²

From an Islamic viewpoint, this statement is a clear expression of *ittihad khass* (the union of God with a specific person). We have seen that some Sufis are willing to accept the possibility of such a union in holy persons like Al Hallaj. We have also seen that theologians like Ibn Taymiyya strongly object to the notion of *ittihad* if it implies an actual union with the divine essence rather than with the divine will. The issue, though, is whether such a union necessarily involves a violation of divine unity and transcendence.

From a Christian viewpoint, it seems difficult to imagine how the union of the Divine Word with a human nature involves a threat to divine unity and transcendence. In what sense does the Incarnation take away from the unity of God? From a human perspective, it seems clear that a bride does not lose the unity of her personhood when she unites with her husband for the first time. The same would hold true for the husband. Surely the infinite and omnipresent God can unite with a created human nature without ceasing to be infinite and omnipresent.

Perhaps the fear is that the Incarnation can lead to a confusion of the human with the divine or the unwarranted association of something created with the Creator. However, we have seen that the orthodox Christian understanding of the Incarnation clearly affirms that the two natures unite "without confusion and change." Perhaps, though, the issue goes even deeper. It might be that Islam and Christianity start out with two different views of the Godhead. Christianity, after all, holds to a Trinitarian conception of God whereas Islam does not.

⁸² St. Leo the Great, *Letters*, trans. Edmund Hunt, C.S.C. in *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 34 (New York: Fathers of the Church Inc., 1957), pp. 97-98.

The doctrine of the Incarnation, in many ways, depends upon the doctrine of the Trinity since it is only because the Eternal Word is generated by the Father that the Word can become flesh without the divine essence being divided or diminished. If the Incarnation is understood to mean that the total reality of the Godhead is contained within and constricted by the limitations of a human body, then it certainly is problematical. This is probably why the Qur'an expresses revulsion at the thought that "God is Christ, the Son of Mary" (5:17). However, the Christian understanding of the Incarnation in no way implies that the Eternal Word, while incarnate on earth, ceased to enjoy the supreme power of the infinite Godhead within the Trinitarian Mystery. Indeed, The Council of Rome (382) states: "Anyone who says that the Son, while incarnate on earth, was not in heaven with the Father, is a heretic."⁸³

The Trinity is understood to be a revealed mystery in the Christian faith. It was only because the early Church had the experience of the divine present in Jesus and the Holy Spirit that the Trinitarian mystery came to light. As in the case of the Incarnation, the Church has always been careful to assert that the Trinity does not involve a separation or division of the divine essence. As the *Decree for the Jacobites* (1442) makes clear: "These three persons are one God and not three gods, for the three are one substance, one essence, one nature, one Godhead, one infinity, one eternity, and everything (in them) is one when there is no opposition of relationship."⁸⁴

While holding to an absolute affirmation of divine unity, the Christian view of God also places great importance on the concept of divine fecundity. Thus, while the Islamic emphasis is on the maintenance of divine unity, the Christian emphasis is on how the one divine essence is communicated through the dynamics of eternal generation in the Word and eternal spiration in the Holy Spirit. According to St. Bonaventure, the Trinity is the loftiest

⁸³ Neuner and Dupuis, p. 101.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 111.

and most devout concept of God because it combines an emphasis on divine “unity, simplicity, immensity, immutability and necessity” with an equal emphasis on “fecundity, love, generosity, equality, kinship, likeness, and inseparability.”⁸⁵

As with the Incarnation, Christians often have a difficult time explaining the Trinity to Muslims. Probably the best way to begin is for the Christian to affirm the sacred principle of Islam that “there is no God but God” and to say that, whatever the Trinity means, it does not mean three gods. At the deepest level, the Trinity is the affirmation that God’s Word and Spirit are inseparable from the divine essence. This is how John of Damascus tried to explain the Trinity to his Muslim neighbors when they accused Christians of being hetaerists or associators by declaring Christ to be the Son of God and God. As John points out:

As long as you say that Christ is the Word of God and Spirit, why do you accuse us of being Hetaerists? For the word, and the spirit, is inseparable from that in which it naturally has existence. Therefore, if the Word of God is in God, then it is obvious that He is God. If, however, He is outside of God, then according to you, God is without word and without spirit. Consequently, by avoiding the introduction of an associate with God you have mutilated Him . . . as if you were dealing with a stone or a piece of wood or some other inanimate object.⁸⁶

The affirmation of the divinity of the Word and Spirit is, therefore, a recognition that the “living God” is eternally and immanently communicated through generation and spiration. For Christians, the Muslim idea of the “Eternal Qur’an” is something of an analogue to the Eternal Logos. If the Eternal Qur’an is eternal, then it cannot be separable from the divine essence. If it is not inseparable from the divine essence then it must be in

⁸⁵ St. Bonaventure, *The Breviloquium*, trans. José de Vinck (Paterson, N.J.: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1962), p. 35.

⁸⁶ John of Damascus, *On Heresies*, 101, in *Saint John of Damascus: Writings*, trans. Frederick H. Chase (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1958), p. 156.

some way by a subsistence or hypostasis of the divine essence. However, if it is other than the divine essence, then this would mean that something other than God shares eternity with God.

4) The Qur'anic Witness Against the Incarnation

Given the absolute authority that the Qur'an has for Muslims, Christians should be understanding towards the Islamic rejection of the Incarnation, especially since the Qur'anic rejection of Jesus' divine filiation appears absolute. The Christian response takes on three dimensions: 1) the Qur'an does not reject the orthodox formulation of the Incarnation but only heterodox formulations which Christians also reject; 2) the Qur'an reflects the cultural understanding of the seventh century Semitic mind which found the doctrine of the Incarnation not only difficult to grasp but also offensive to a believer in monotheism; and 3) the Qur'an, in its own way, recognizes the special status and primacy of Christ, and in an ambiguous ways points to Jesus' divinity.

The first aspect of this response looks to see if in the Qur'an there is any evidence of the Christological formulations of the councils. After a careful study of the texts of the Qur'an that deal with the Trinity and the Incarnation, the Italian Islamicist Giulio Basetti-Sani concludes that the Qur'an condemns a tritheism that "has nothing to do with the formulation of the dogma of the Trinity."⁸⁷ Likewise, the Qur'an does not condemn "the doctrine of Chalcedon, but Monophysite and Nestorian formulations of the doctrine . . . nowhere in the Koran is there a formulation of the orthodox doctrine (of Chalcedon and Constantinople) regarding the Incarnation."⁸⁸

Beyond the absence of any orthodox formulations of the doctrine of the Incarnation, there are also passages in the Qur'an which reflect a culture-bound understanding of what is meant by being the Son of God. For example, when the Qur'an asks

⁸⁷ Giulio Basetti-Sani, O.F.M., *The Koran in the Light of Christ*, trans. W. R. Carroll and B. Dauphinee (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1977), p. 136.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

"How can He (God) have a son when He hath no consort?" (6:101, the implication is that God must beget a son by carnal relations. This, of course, is not how Christians understand either the eternal generation of the Son from the Father or the incarnation of the Word in the womb of the Virgin Mary. Such a statement, though, does make sense when understood within the context of pagan Arabia in which there was a belief in the three daughters of Allah: al-Lat, Manat, and al-Uzza).⁸⁹

There are also various anthropomorphisms in the Qur'an that reflect the image of God as a princely figure sitting on a throne (7:54) who creates with two hands (38:75). There are likewise passages which have God swearing by the sky (surah 52), the dawn (surah 89) and the sun (surah 91). Awareness of these anthropomorphisms is employed by Paul of Antioch in his defense of the Incarnation and the Trinity. If Muslims accept the passages in the Qur'an that say God has "two eyes and hands, a face, a side, members and organs" and yet still hold to the unity and transcendence of God, so also can Christians acknowledge God as Father, Son and Spirit because these terms are found in the New Testament. Moreover, Christians interpret these terms in such a way that God is not conceived of as "composite persons with parts and divisions." Likewise, "the Father and Son are not the fatherhood and sonship of marriage and begetting. of sexual union and intercourse."⁹⁰

Christians of today can accept the warnings of the Qur'an as legitimate admonitions against tritheism and carnal conceptions of divine filiation. The great affirmation of God's unity found in Surah 112 can be spoken of with equal faith by Christians as well as Muslims: "Say: He is God, the One and Only" (112:1). Likewise, Christians could appreciate the passage: "He begetteth not, nor is He begotten" (112:2) as referring to the eternal and undivided unity of the divine essence within the Trinity. Indeed, the concern of Surah 112:2 is repeated almost verbatim by the

⁸⁹ See John L. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 5-6.

⁹⁰ Michel, p. 338.

Fourth Lateran Council (1215) when it says: "*essentia seu natura divina . . . non est generans, neque genita, nec procedens*" (the divine essence or nature is not generating, nor generated, nor proceeding).⁹¹

In the Qur'an 6:50 and 7:188, Muhammad confesses that he knows not "the Unseen" or the "Mystery" of God. From a Christian point of view, such an admission is significant because a mystery is understood to be something unknowable without divine revelation. A Christian, therefore, can accept the prophetic role of Muhammad as one who witnessed to the truth of monotheism and the day of judgment. The condemnations of the Trinity and the Incarnation can be appreciated by Christians as condemnations of deviant expressions of those doctrines.

There is still another way in which Christians can appreciate the Qur'an: namely, as an indirect and incomplete affirmation of the divinity of Christ. The French scholar Georges Tatar⁹² has pointed to Surah 2:254 (2:253 in Yusef Ali's translation) as an affirmation that God has endowed some apostles with gifts above others. This passage goes on to say that "to Jesus, the son of Mary, We gave clear signs and strengthened him with the Holy Spirit." What are these gifts? Here we see that the Qur'an clearly affirms that Jesus was endowed with special qualities: the conception and birth to a virgin (19:20-21) who is said to be exalted above all women (3:42); the gift of speech from infancy (5:110; 19:29); the ability to work miracles through God's permission like curing the blind and leprous (5:10) and raising the dead (3:43 and 5:110). Only Jesus is given the privilege of participating in the uniquely divine activity of the insufflation of

⁹¹ Denzinger-Schönmetzer, 432-804. The similarity of this statement of Lateran IV to the Qur'anic passage 112:2 demonstrates a Christian concern for divine unity equal to the Islamic concern. Since the Christian insistence on the unity of the divine essence has been the Christian teaching from the beginning, there is no reason to speculate on a possible influence of the Qur'an on Lateran IV.

⁹² See Georges Tatar, "Le Coran confère la primauté à Jesus-Christ exégèse du verset coranique 2/254" in *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 226.

life (3:49 and 5:110). Jesus is also given the exalted titles of "Word of God" (3:45; 4:171) and "Spirit of God" (4:171), and Jesus is the only prophet who is explicitly declared to be "confirmed by the Holy Spirit" (2:87). Moreover, the Qur'an also states that Jesus was mysteriously raised up to God (4:158) and given special intimacy with God (3:45 and 55).

There is a Christian way of reading of these passages as an embryonic witness to the power and divinity of Christ. According to Giulio Basetti-Sani, the Qur'an contains "the germs of the Christian teaching on the divinity of Christ" which "could not have been understood in their full meaning either by Mohammed or by his audience."⁹³ What is proposed is a Christian reading of the Qur'an which can disclose certain signs that point to the mystery of Christ. Just as Christians have read the Old Testament in the light of Christ, so also can the Qur'an be read in the light of Christ. Christians can understand the Qur'an as a revelation⁹⁴ given to the polytheistic Arabs of Muhammad's day to move them towards acceptance of God's unity, transcendence and

⁹³ Basetti-Sani, p. 175.

⁹⁴ The question of how the Qur'an could be understood as a divine revelation by Catholics is beyond the scope of this article. Only a few tentative suggestions can be made. Since Vatican II's *Dei Verbum*, 4 affirms the definitive nature of the revelation given in Christ, Catholics could only understand the Qur'an as a genuine revelation in a qualified sense. Perhaps it could be understood as a partial revelation of divine truth given as a type of *post factum* preparation for the Gospel (*praeparatio evangelica*). Another possibility is to understand the Qur'an as genuine private revelation received by Muhammad according to the subjective understanding of his theological and cultural worldview (i.e. *ad modum recipientis*). Yet another possibility is to understand the Qur'an as a combination of authentic revelations given by God intermixed with the subjective interpretations and applications of Muhammad. Instructive in this regard are the comments of Augustin Poulain, S.J. on private revelations made in his monumental study, *The Graces of Interior Prayer*. Poulain points out that even private revelations of genuine divine origin can be influenced by such factors as "faulty interpretations," "the mingling of human activity with supernatural action during the revelation," and "the subsequent, but involuntary modifications made by the person who receives the revelation." See A. Poulain, *The Graces of Interior Prayer*, sixth ed., trans. Leonora L. Y. Smith (St. Louis: Herder and Herder, 1950), pp. 323-340.

moral guidance.⁹⁵ Thus, in the Qur'an, Christians discern what Nicholas of Cusa called the *radius lucidissimi Evangelii* (a ray of the most luminous Gospel).

Conclusion

In the Qur'an, Muhammad declares that "if (God) Most Gracious had a son, I would be the first to worship" (43:81). From a Christian point of view, God has a Son who is "the very imprint of His being" (Heb. 1:3). Islam and Christianity have so much in common, but each has its own ultimate norm of judgment. For Muslims, the Qur'an is the supreme manifestation of God's Word, for it contains the guidance and truth which enable human beings to experience the all-merciful Presence of God. For Christianity, Jesus is the supreme revelation of the Eternal Word, and by mystical incorporation into the person of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit, Christians are brought into intimacy with God.

Perhaps the difference between the two is that Islam is more prophetic in both its origin and in its enduring expressions. Christianity, however, emerges from the prophetic foundation of Judaism but soon incorporates mystical doctrines like the Incarnation and the Trinity into its enduring character.⁹⁶ The fact that Islamic mystics show the deepest appreciation for the Christian dogma of the Incarnation is a sign that this dogma is a mystery that goes beyond rational discourse. A mystery, though, is not something hidden but rather a revelation of such great power and luminescence that it cannot be fully grasped or expressed by the human mind. This is why the best Christology does not come

⁹⁵ In a conversation we had on this subject, Prof. José Pereira of Fordham University suggested "the monotheistic minimum" as an apt description of the basic complex of ideas affirmed in the Qur'an (i.e. divine unity, transcendence and moral guidance).

⁹⁶ This is not to deny that there has been a rich tradition of mysticism within Islam (basically post-Qur'anic). It is only intended to describe the doctrinal character of Christian dogmas like the Trinity, the Incarnation and the Eucharist which are essentially mystical in nature.

from above or below but from within—within the mystery of Christ and the ongoing participation in the Incarnation. It is only through the living experience of the Incarnate Christ in grace, sacraments and love that Christians can proclaim and understand Jesus Christ as fully human and fully divine.