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Source: *Neotestamentica*, 2015, Vol. 49, No. 2 (2015), pp. 297-320

Published by: New Testament Society of Southern Africa

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43927238>

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# **“Who Do You Say that I Am?”: Christians and Muslims Disputing the Historical Jesus**

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## **Abstract**

The article presents the case against appealing to the “historical Jesus” as common ground between Christians and Muslims. It first teases out relevant aspects of Christianity’s own deployment of historical criticism of the Bible before investigating how Muslims have engaged with the same material for the purposes of inviting Christians to Islam. In the light of a clear double standard at work here, the implications of historical criticism for the Qur’ān’s handling of Jesus are analysed and conditions identified that would allow Muslims to engage more fully *qua* Muslims with the “historical Jesus.” A final section supplies a negative answer to the question whether the pursuit of a Muslim-Christian accord over the identity of Jesus is even a sensible objective for a Christian seeking better relations with Muslims.<sup>1</sup>

## **Key Terms**

biblical and qur’ānic hermeneutics; Christian-Muslim relations; Christology; Deism; historical criticism; historical Jesus; historiography; interreligious dialogue

## **1 Introduction**

In our time, understanding and reconciliation between different religious communities, most especially between Christians and Muslims, is a priority in all our countries. Yet, finding the correct modality is no easy matter. Should we seek out existing common ground? Agree to disagree,

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<sup>1</sup> With heartfelt thanks to several colleagues for advice and criticism: Bridget Gilfillan Upton, David Marshall, Daniel Madigan SJ and John Moffatt SJ as well as the anonymous reviewers for *Neotestamentica* whose comments have helped me clarify my thoughts.

accepting our differences? Work towards establishing some kind of shared outlook? Or a mixture of all these things? We usually come to situations of tension and conflict with preconceived ideas of what is possible and desirable, yet long-term discernment is required to work out an adequate way of proceeding. This article is a contribution to that discernment and its aim is to show that, contrary to what may seem common sense, trying to make Jesus the basis of interreligious agreement between Christians and Muslims is in fact not a sensible way to go.

I say that this is contrary to common sense because it is not unusual for a Muslim entering into dialogue with a Christian to assume that, since Jesus Christ appears in the Qur'ān and is revered, just as Muhammad is, as a prophet of Islam, he must represent common ground between the two religions.<sup>2</sup> In fact, assuming that each interlocutor keeps to the standard dogmas of her religion, divergent doctrinal claims about Jesus's identity, life, death and destiny invariably arise, leading the discussion down the dead-end of sharp disagreement. Yet, it might be argued, modern research into Christian origins has for some considerable time now been weakening the confidence Christians have in the age-old christological affirmations enshrined in the creeds; the "Christ of (Christian) faith," as some would have it, necessarily different from the Christ of Muslim belief, need no longer be an impediment to sober interreligious discussion. Instead, more and more weight is being placed on the flesh-and-blood "Jesus of history." Is it not, then, time to investigate the possibility that this *historical* Jesus, rather than the Christ of faith, might after all furnish Muslim-Christian dialogue with an opportunity for convergence? If, as it could be said, the "Christs of faith" of the two religions are essentially the products of dogmatic religious construction (about which one might feel enthusiasm or regret), the Jesus who lived in and journeyed through Palestine two thousand years ago is a singular entity, really existing and, surely, unambiguous in his self-understanding. In an age which sees dogmatics as a petty-fogging displacement activity, there must be at least a suspicion that, were it possible to talk directly to him, he would scoff at the miles of bookshelves devoted to recondite speculation about his sacred identity.

In fact, Qur'ān 5:116 presents just such a scenario, envisaging a conversation between Jesus Christ and God at the final judgment about who he claimed to be:

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<sup>2</sup> A recent example is Afsaruddin (2014).

And when Allah saith: O Jesus, son of Mary! Didst thou say unto mankind: Take me and my mother for two gods beside Allah? he saith: Be glorified! It was not mine to utter that to which I had no right. If I used to say it, then Thou knewest it. Thou knowest what is in my mind, and I know not what is in Thy Mind. Lo! Thou, only Thou, art the Knower of Things Hidden.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, it may also be that, were it possible to engage Jesus in conversation, he would challenge traditional Muslim beliefs as well. But the very fact that it was he who did this would surely command the respect and assent of the faithful of both religions. So, we ask the question: Can the *historical* Jesus really be a new focus around which a consensus between Christians and Muslims could be forged?

It is the burden of this article to show not merely that this is not feasible as a project but also that to think along these lines is profoundly to misunderstand the nature of the claims about him articulated in the Qur'ān. The pursuit of an irenic accord between Christians and Muslims (and anyone else interested in taking part) is understandable and the intentions behind it often laudable. It is, additionally, sure to enthuse a small minority of believers. But it does not promise a fruitful way forward for healthy Christian-Muslim relations. To demonstrate this, I shall break down the proposal outlined above into the triangle of its three constituent dialogues: the first, between Christianity and modern critical historiography (usually referred to under the rubric of the “quest for the historical Jesus”); the second, between Islam and that same modern critical historiography; and the third, between the two religions themselves. I shall end with a sketch of the kind of highly attenuated consensus which those few individuals might manage to construct within this triangulation, trusting that its modesty will show the original aspiration to be ill-founded.

## 2 The Quest for the Historical Jesus

The so-called “quest for the historical Jesus” is a component of the broader project of the historical criticism of the Jewish and Christian scriptures. The initial impulse which led scholars to “read between the lines” of the NT texts was a suspicion, itself grounded in a comprehensive theological vision. The suspicion was that the founding texts of Christianity were part of an exercise in deception, the manufacture of a religious falsehood out of

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<sup>3</sup> Marmaduke Pickthall translation.

the altered memory of the life and ministry of the historical Jesus of Nazareth. Applying a hermeneutic of suspicion, it was thought, would enable those self-same texts to yield their secrets and tell the very story of Jesus's life and message which they had originally been composed to mask.

The theology that underlay this suspicion was the Deism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The aesthetic attraction of Deism lay in its attachment to a vision of a providentially ordered universe, a picture coherent with the imaginary undergirded by the new mechanics of Newton (cf. Lucci 2008). This vision precluded several key items of traditional Christian belief, notably divine intervention, the miraculous, even the very idea of divine revelation. Consequently, so-called revealed truths were also dispensed with: the divine nature of Christ and the triune godhead. Deists held that any religion that did not place itself squarely beneath the aegis of reason could only be the product of superstition and priestcraft. Normative Christianity, even in stripped-down, Protestant guise, attracted this charge. Hence, Deism came to be intimately linked with the assumption that Jesus's actual self-understanding must have been fundamentally at odds with the claims of the church that claimed him as her own. The well-known "fragments" of the eighteenth-century Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1971)<sup>4</sup> are emblematic of just this configuration.

David Friedrich Strauss (1808–1874) was no Deist but his theological sensibility was so attuned to the demands of the science of his day that he assumed Deism's dislike of the miraculous. His epoch-making *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet* (1846)<sup>5</sup> tells a new story of Jesus, excluding the divinity of Christ and attributing anything in the gospels that does not fit into a naturalistic framework to the mythologizing work of the early Christian community. This fundamental insight into the mythical element of the gospels, explosively controversial in the nineteenth century, would go on to become one of the core axioms of much contemporary biblical scholarship. This entails that Jesus could not have foreseen his death and did not see himself as a Saviour or the founder of a new religion, let alone a person of the Trinity. Where Reimarus and Strauss had pointed the way, a host of other questers would now join the fray.<sup>6</sup>

By the 1950s, a desire had arisen to come to an understanding of the historical Jesus that was more in line with traditional Christian belief

<sup>4</sup> First published in the 1770s by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing.

<sup>5</sup> First published in German in 1835–1836.

<sup>6</sup> Schweitzer (1910) is the classic work on the first quest.

rather than being corrosive of it. This would in due course be fortified by a post-War desire to draw the Jewish and Christian worlds back into dialogue, something that would be effected by rediscovering the Jewishness of Jesus and of his milieu. This “second quest,” as it is sometimes called, was grafted on to the existentialist theology of Rudolf Bultmann, for whom historical research into the life of Jesus was not that important; it was quite enough that Christ had existed and died on a cross. What propelled this new phase of the quest was a commitment to the historical reality of Christ hardwired into Christian instinct by the NT itself (cf. 1 Cor 15:12–19). A third quest would emerge in the late 1980s, a rather more diffuse affair, more interdisciplinary than its predecessors and spurred on by a host of archaeological discoveries. Some of its proponents are still actively pursuing research into the field today.

It is characteristic of these twentieth-century efforts to define criteria that allow the reader to evaluate the authenticity of a given biblical passage and to attempt a full reconstruction of Jesus’s life, identity and self-understanding.<sup>7</sup> Twentieth-century writers have portrayed Jesus variously as a Zealot (Brandon 1967), a Pharisee (Sanders 1985), a Graeco-Roman Cynic philosopher (Mack 1988), an apocalyptic preacher (Ehrman 1999), a courageous revolutionary and passionate critic of the social hierarchies of both Jewish and Roman worlds (Crossan 1994), and much more besides. In critical stance, they range from Crossan’s radical scepticism, for whom the entire passion narrative is a fabrication extrapolated from OT prophecy, to the evangelical orthodoxy of N. T. Wright (1996), who argues that Jesus’s actual self-consciousness broadly coheres with the trajectory of the subsequent christological thinking of the church.

This rapid overview makes it clear that the quest for the historical Jesus is not an objective, value-free enterprise but one which stems from a prior stance of faith or scepticism. By pursuing it, we do not encounter the Jesus who walked the roads of Palestine but a speculative reconstruction based on the assumptions fed into the calculation at the outset, reconstructions that are invariably pre-set for naturalism.<sup>8</sup> It should come as no surprise, therefore, that the quest has not crystallised a consensus

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<sup>7</sup> There are, however, moves more recently to question the use of criteria. See Keith and Le Donne, eds. (2012). There has also been an increasing focus on memory studies in constructing the life of Jesus of Nazareth; see Allison (2010).

<sup>8</sup> An unusual exception is Meier (1994) who refuses to rule out the possibility that Jesus really did work miracles.

but, tending to confirm the *a priori* commitments of those undertaking it, perpetuates already existing disagreement. As George Tyrrell notes of the first quest, the Christ the questers encounter, “looking back through nineteen centuries of Catholic darkness, is only the reflection of a Liberal Protestant face, seen at the bottom of a deep well” (1910, 44).

The quest is also part of a greater set of divisions. Theologies reminiscent of Barth’s and Bultmann’s, for whom the historical Jesus is just not important, live on unabated. Meanwhile, Joseph Ratzinger (the then Pope Benedict XVI) (2007, 2011, 2012) doffs his cap in the general direction of the historical-critical enterprise but then returns to rather more traditional ways of engaging with the figure of Jesus which he deems still to be intellectually respectable. The crisis provoked by historical criticism has also motivated not a few Christians to adopt sophisticated hermeneutical understandings of the nature of Christian faith and revelation and its relationship to the biblical sources in such a way as to compensate for foundations judged to be shaky. And all of this is to say nothing of that fundamentalist approach which has taken on a life of its own and which, it thinks, cedes nothing to the historical critics.

One is bound to ask in the light of all this: if the quest is unable to foster a consensus among Christians (and post-Christians), how is it ever likely to create a consensus between Christians and Muslims? We can, however, only fully confirm the radical improbability of such an outcome after looking at how Muslims themselves have understood their own commitment to historical reality.

### 3 Muslim Historiography in Tradition and Modernity

The Muslim tradition knows the figure of Jesus as ‘Isa and derives its understanding of his life and identity both from the Qur’ān and from a multitude of traditional narratives found in a variety of different genres of writing.<sup>9</sup> This traditional material, some of it collected in Khalidi (2003), includes Sufi stories, “tales of the prophets” and hadith narratives but adds little of doctrinal weight that need concern us, embellishing the Qur’ān’s portrait of Jesus with elements eschatological, ascetical and prophetic.<sup>10</sup>

There is no avoiding that the central plank of the Muslim understanding of Jesus is that he was a messenger of God, like Muhammad

<sup>9</sup> For Jesus in the Qur’ān and Islamic tradition, see Parrinder (1965), Räisänen (1980), Cragg (1985), Robinson (1991), Borrmans (2005), Zahniser (2008) and Leirvik (2010).

<sup>10</sup> That is, they show Jesus as vouching for the prophethood of Muhammad.



himself, and nothing more, and certainly not God's Son (cf. Qur'ān 4:171 and 112:3). Famously, the qur'ānic text alludes to a doubt about the crucifixion and death of Jesus, about which more will be said shortly. It also grants him several titles (Qur'ān 4:171 calls him "word", "spirit" and "messiah," titles all reminiscent, in one way or another, of Christian theology) and attributes to him a number of miracles, including that of speaking from the cradle, fashioning a bird from clay and animating it with his breath, and even raising the dead (Qur'ān 19:30–33 and 3:49). He is also the product of a virgin birth (Qur'ān 3:47). Finally, he receives a scripture from God, the *injīl*, and foresees the coming of another prophet, Ahmad, understood to be Muhammad (Qur'ān 3:3 and 61:6). Some Muslims have seen in the so-called *Gospel of Barnabas* (Sox 1984) an original and authentic account of the life and ministry of Jesus. *Barnabas* gives us a Jesus almost entirely compatible with the qur'ānic view, and polemicists have invested much effort in explaining how the Muslim Jesus is indeed the true Jesus of history.<sup>11</sup> Serious scholars are agreed, bearing in mind that the oldest extant manuscripts are in Italian and Spanish and date from the late medieval period, that it is in fact a late text composed within an Islamic milieu.<sup>12</sup>

There are two possible ways to reconcile the "Muslim Jesus" with the "Jesus of history." The first, which is usually adopted by Muslims who want to use historical criticism to demonstrate the human fabrication of the Bible and thus its inferiority to the Qur'ān, is to bring the dogmatic statements of the Muslim tradition into some sort of harmony with the results of "historical Jesus" research. The second would be to explore the extent to which the Islamic material about Jesus might itself offer the basis for "historical Jesus" reflection. In fact, the first collapses, we will show, into the second, which, in turn, proves to be highly problematic.<sup>13</sup>

A taste among Muslims for the historical criticism of the Bible can be traced back to one Dr Wazir Khan, an Indian Muslim who, during medical studies in London, came across an English translation of Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu* and various other works of biblical criticism (Bennett 1996, 78). On his return to India, he found himself involved in a public debate between a group of Muslims and the German evangelist, Karl Gottlieb Pfander. Khan's knowledge of historical criticism proved to be of

<sup>11</sup> A notable example from the modern period is Ur-Rahim and Thomson (1996).

<sup>12</sup> See Leirvik (2002).

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of Muslim approaches to biblical criticism in general, see McAuliffe (1996).



tremendous rhetorical value in the exchange, not least thanks to Pfander's surprising ignorance of the latest developments in German scholarship. The Muslims present could not help but sense they had been victorious and memory of the occasion henceforth would remind Muslims that mounting a vigorous intellectual defence of their religion in the face of aggressive European mission could be accomplished by recourse to criticism of the Bible.

It must be acknowledged that there is a certain resonance between the scepticism regarding Christian doctrinal claims of, on the one hand, historical criticism and, on the other, the Qur'ān. Deism, after all, has a closer affinity to Islam than it does to Christianity. Both unitarian in conviction, they take a dim view of mainstream christological and Trinitarian creedal affirmations. They consider them to be irrational claims, foreign certainly to the consciousness of Christ but arguably to the NT itself, being retrospectively superimposed by communities which all-too rapidly deviated from the simple teaching of Jesus.<sup>14</sup>

This explains why a number of Muslim writers anxious to invite Christians if not to Islam itself then at least to a more unitarian style of Christian belief, have taken the "historical Jesus" as fertile ground for exploration. At the higher end of the range of such contributions comes the immensely thoughtful Maqsood (1991), which picks up on work done by "historical Jesus" scholars on Pharisaism in the 1980s. Maqsood argues that Jesus himself was probably a Pharisee, *pace* the impression given by the gospels, and that Pharisaism was the school of Judaism closest to Islam. What makes Maqsood's triangulation stimulating is that it picks up on a difficult issue for modern Christian exegesis: how to understand gospel portrayals of Judaism that seemingly owe more to polemical intent than historical accuracy.

At the lower end comes Mohamed Talbi's frankly bizarre *Histoire du Christ* (2011), the work of a Tunisian intellectual and *quondam* promoter of Muslim-Christian dialogue, who, stung by Pope Benedict's 2006 Regensburg Lecture took it upon himself to reconstruct the goings-on behind the gospel texts according to his own eccentric speculations. Talbi believes that the gospel texts have fused two figures: the true Prophet and man of peace, and a kingly insurrectionist of gnostic hue. Worked out at great length and with surprising vitriol, this is perhaps not

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<sup>14</sup> It is no coincidence that the *philosophes* saw in Islam, from the little they knew of it, a rather superior, more agreeable form of monotheism than the Christianity to which they had been exposed. Cf. Garcia (2012).

best taken as an essay on the life of Christ so much as a dramatic dissection of the Christianity Talbi has obviously come to loathe.<sup>15</sup>

Typical of this broad genre of Muslim writing on the “historical Jesus” is the assumption, sometimes tacit, that the “corruption” (*tahrīf*) of the biblical text which Islamic tradition has long seen as the cause of the deviations to which both Jews and Christians have succumbed, is somehow evidenced by the conclusions of historical biblical criticism.<sup>16</sup> In short, the fact that Christian exegetes are happy to admit that much of the NT derives from both material and processes of redaction which date from long after the death of Jesus, is taken as testifying to the inauthenticity of these scriptures. In fact, historical criticism does not introduce a radical new doubt about the origins of the Christian scriptures. The gospels have always borne the names of human authors who were never regarded as infallible prophets or privileged channels of God’s revealed word. Christians have never believed that the gospels were sent down word for word from God as Muslims believe the Qur’ān to have been. Notwithstanding, some Muslims have taken historical-critical scholarship as confirmation of the doubts the tradition has long harboured about the integrity of the Bible, and this seems to have provided the warrant for the further assumption that the Qur’ān itself need *not* be subjected to the purgative fires of historical criticism. This manifest double standard is not necessarily opportunistic; it is sincerely held. But a Christian need hardly feel obliged to follow suit. Why should a method that excludes the supernatural powers ascribed to Christ in the gospels be regarded as inappropriate to probe similar qur’ānic claims? The qur’ānic Jesus, we have seen, is a miracle worker who can see into the future. He is the miraculous channel of God’s own word. According to the majority reading of the passage which treats of his crucifixion, he was raised directly to heaven by God before he could die (Qur’ān 5:117). He is a prophet of the qur’ānic kind which, as Muslim thought will, in time, spell out, means that he is both infallible and impeccable. These are precisely the sorts of belief which historical criticism longs to demythologise. It should, therefore, be clear that there can be no straightforward identification of the qur’ānic

<sup>15</sup> Other examples of the genre are the ambitious but not so rigorous Fatoohi (2007, 2009), a convert to Islam, as well as the not entirely reliable Zein (2003).

<sup>16</sup> On the Muslim charge against Jews and Christians that they have tampered with their scriptures, see Nickell (2011). For more on the work of Ibn Hazm who is responsible for the doctrine’s systematic application to Christianity, see Aasi (2007). On Muslim polemic against the Hebrew Bible, see Lazarus-Yafeh (1992).

Jesus with any of the reconstructions of the historical Jesus given in the Christian literature, in spite of the assumption of the Muslim writers noted above who are rather too quick to assimilate the two.

Assuming that there is no Christian reason to indulge this double standard, it must be right to apply historical-critical considerations to the qur'ānic text itself and so to pursue the second line of enquiry as indicated above. This approach, in fact, raises the issue of historical criticism of the Qur'ān in general.<sup>17</sup> But for our purposes, it will suffice to deal with those parts of it which treat of Jesus. In what follows, I will attempt to trace only the principle lines of an argument, alluding where necessary, to on-going areas of controversy.

Regarding the qur'ānic Jesus, there are three evident impediments preventing Muslim readers of the Qur'ān from entering into fruitful dialogue with the hermeneutics of criticism. The first is the preponderance accorded universally among Muslims to the voice of the Qur'ān. Its authority simply cannot be trumped. What it states clearly and unambiguously is to be taken as historical fact because it is God, the Almighty Creator, who is speaking. If the Qur'ān states that Jesus did not die on a cross, *roma locuta est, causa finita est*. Insofar, therefore, as the Qur'ān makes *historical* claims with which the naturalistic ethos of historical criticism would have difficulty, there would seem to be little way of making progress. There are many such claims. It is no exaggeration to say that modern Muslims, rather more so than modern Christians, still inhabit an enchanted world of miracle, *jinn*, and providence and this is at least partly due to the contents of the Qur'ān and the ontological concessions granted them by still-prevailing qur'ānic hermeneutics.<sup>18</sup>

Second, from an historical-critical point of view, the Qur'ān's material (the later traditions are even more problematic), if it is granted that it is not divine writ, has no credibility as historical evidence about Jesus. It comes too late after the event. The Qur'ān itself arrives, according

<sup>17</sup> There is much that could be said about the historical criticism of the Qur'ān in general, a topic which continues to be a bone of contention between Muslim and non-Muslim scholars of Islamic origins. To take a representative selection: Peters (1994), Donner (2010), the polemical Warraq (2000) and Neuwirth (2014).

<sup>18</sup> One can add here that not only 'Isa but all the other prophets mentioned in the Qur'ān would be supposed to have been real historical beings, even those in whose stories a strongly mythological element is to be detected. This would be the case, for instance, with Ayoub (Job) and Yunus (Jonah) as well as the mysterious al-Khidr of Qur'ān 18:65–82. We should remember, too, the Night Journey of Muhammad recounted in Qur'ān 17:1.

to Muslim understanding, some six centuries after the end of Jesus's terrestrial sojourn. Only those who take for granted its supernatural provenance will be convinced of its compelling truth. Paradoxically, the non-Muslim reader actually has reason to accord some of these passages evidential value because she will have no hesitation in seeing in them the influence of pre-Islamic sources, for example, of Christian apocrypha dating from the first centuries of the Christian era. But this thought is not acceptable within an Islamic framework: Muhammad did not compose the Qur'ān. It is sent down in its exact form directly from God and so cannot be seen as an assembly of material from a pre-existing library (e.g., Qur'ān 16:89).

Third, we have to face the far-reaching consequences of the Qur'ān's apparent denial of the crucifixion of Jesus. By and large, one datum upon which "historical Jesus" scholars are minded to concur is that if Jesus did indeed exist then he died by Roman crucifixion. The cruel execution of the Messiah was such an unexpected turn of events and, being scandalous, so potentially damaging to the young Christian community, that it is practically inconceivable that the early church would have invented it. If it be granted, for the sake of argument, that Qur'ān 4:157 does in fact deny that Jesus died on a cross, which is the mainstream interpretation of the passage, then we face a huge theological difficulty in aligning Muslim claims with a basic requirement of historical research. The reason is this: the standard explanation for the apparent crucifixion of Jesus is that a divine illusion was perpetrated, only to be unmasked with the coming of the Qur'ān. We are forced by this strategy of interpretation to the conclusion that, if God might leave a whole community labouring for centuries under a misapprehension with regard to a highly significant matter of fact, then ordinary historical facts are not wholly to be trusted. The illusion that everyone took as evidence that Jesus *had* been crucified was the result of a deliberate divine initiative. There is no question of historical research ever being able to get to the truth behind the illusion thus created. Here we are not only in a situation of conflict between what a religious tradition asserts and what historical criticism can stomach; rather, the religious tradition has launched a weapon which, if taken seriously, can only corrode not merely the foundations of historical scholarship but ultimately of all empirical claims, including religious ones.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> A point that was not lost on the Muslim theologian Fakr al-Din al-Razi (d. 1209) (Ayoub 2007, 164).

These three problems are weighty enough between them to ensure, in my judgment, that the vast majority of Muslims will simply never entertain the kinds of question which historical criticism poses and, furthermore, will regard their own refusal as a sign of the vigour of the religion making the claims.

But, it will be argued, to raise the question of the historical Jesus, as we are doing, is already to have adverted to the possibility of an inevitable, if perhaps grudging, acknowledgement by Muslim believers of the facticity of history, the strength of the naturalistic viewpoint and the desirability of accepting that religious texts are merely human artefacts. Will not Muslims slowly but surely make the same move that mainstream Christians have by embracing the contribution of historical criticism? Rather than just supplying a trenchant “no” to that question, I want to explore in what remains of this section exactly what might be required of Muslims in relation to each of these obstacles for them to adopt such a “progressive” approach. I shall go out of my way to offer reasons to indicate that such a hope is indeed founded, even if, as the reader will have guessed, I remain to be convinced.

First, Islam has a strong commitment to historiography. It would be quite untrue to suggest that Muslims are not interested in the reality of what took place in the past. Historiographical writings were an important part of the “explosive growth of written literature, which was triggered by the rise of Islam” (Robinson 2003, 8). Its model and methodology were not modern, admittedly, but classical. Historical fact mattered greatly, especially if it had anything to do with the activity of a prophet or of a caliph; the traditionists who compiled the hadith collections saw to that. Muslim work on history took it that “the knowable past was not inferred but preserved” (ibid., 96). The epistemological model that came to prevail in the Muslim world honoured this insight by focusing on the role of the chain of transmission, the *isnād*, in vouching for the truth of any nugget of historical narrative. It was a later development that saw the *isnād* systematically deleted from the text of historical works so that a grand narrative could be constructed and a certain critical stance taken to sources (ibid., 97f.). But even then, historical writing maintains its commitment to the theological idea of providence: God is the source of all action, power and meaning. The move to a vision of the unfolding of terrestrial events independent of God is not made (ibid., 147f.). God might be transcendent but an overpowering monotheism means that nothing happens without His willing it.

Even in the modern period, after exposure to Western critical methods and secularism, Muslim historiography has maintained its character. Partly, this is down to the dynamics of post-colonialism, which tend to set in stone a purported difference between a spiritually bankrupt West and a morally and religiously vigorous Islam. Partly, though, the “naturalisation of history” is not an option as long as the Qur’ān remains a redoubt of the “supernatural in history.” One notable Qur’ān expert, the Egyptian scholar, Nasr Abu Zayd (1943–2010), suggested a way forward here, pointing to the use of different literary genres in the sacred text so as to allow a form of demythologisation to be effected.<sup>20</sup> This approach holds out the possibility that, even if the Qur’ān is always given paramountcy, one can imagine that its words might one day be interpreted in the light of the discoveries of historical research.<sup>21</sup>

In second place, we have to face the fact that the Muslim doctrine of revelation (*wahy*) poses a problem for historical criticism. Belief in the prophethood of Muhammad, as expressed in the Muslim profession of faith (the *shahāda* whose second half states, “Muhammad is the messenger of God”), has been developed in such a way as to exclude the possibility that the Qur’ān has any origin other than direct divine revelation. Muhammad’s agency itself is excluded. In this context, historical criticism is tantamount to accusing Muhammad of lying. An historical method needs to approach its texts as human artefacts, even if subsequent theological theorisation manages to conjoin a divine impulse of some kind to the humanity of the text. Insofar as Muslims dogmatically insist on the exclusively divine nature of the text, there would seem to be an insurmountable barrier. Again, however, one notable twentieth-century Muslim intellectual did suggest a way forward here. The Pakistani scholar, Fazlur Rahman (1919–1988), wrote a ground-breaking work on prophecy (Rahman 2011) and went on to advocate a model of revelation that would make room for the creative input of the prophets in the composition of the message they bore. He was critical of an orthodoxy which,

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<sup>20</sup> For more on his literary approach to the Qur’ān, see Abu Zayd (2003).

<sup>21</sup> If Muslims have overwhelmingly held back from this work, it has not prevented non-Muslims from applying historical criticism to the Qur’ān and hadith, although the reconstruction of Muslim origins is currently a project in crisis. There is no consensus even on questions as basic as whether Muhammad existed, or, assuming he did, whether the Qur’ān had anything to do with him or with the sanctuary in Mecca.



lacked the necessary intellectual tools to combine in its formulation of the dogma the otherness and verbal character of the Revelation on the one hand, and its intimate connection with the work and the religious personality of the Prophet on the other, i.e. it lacked the intellectual capacity to say both that the Qur'ān is entirely the word of God and, in an ordinary sense, also entirely the word of Muhammad. (Rahman 1979, 31)

Such a prophetology would go some way to addressing the difficulties we noted earlier with Jesus's own (Muslim) prophethood, a teaching which, one must agree, is scarcely more palatable to the historical perspective than is his divinity.

We come finally to the third difficulty, that posed by the Qur'ān's apparent denial of the crucifixion. Whilst Muslim tradition has been firm in adhering to this denial, it must be admitted that Qur'ān 4:157 is not at all unambiguous in its meaning. It is part of a passage containing examples of the rebellious behaviour of Israel through the ages and which culminates in an apparently proud Jewish boast about having killed the Messiah. The Qur'ān refutes that claim by commenting that this was only how things appeared to them. The words *shubbiha lahum* ("it was made to appear to them") do not, however, necessarily denote a denial of the crucifixion and/or death of Jesus. They might, for instance, suggest merely that God's purposes had not been defeated by Israel, a point made in the NT itself. If the tradition has overwhelmingly interpreted the passage as a denial of the crucifixion, this is not to exclude the possibility of a minority report. Mahmoud Ayoub (2007, 156–186) explores the hesitations and objections expressed by a number of Muslim writers to various versions of the theory that someone took Jesus's place on the cross.<sup>22</sup> He concludes, shockingly for some, that there is nothing to prevent a Muslim from accepting the crucifixion story.

We have managed to find three contemporary Muslim writers whose work makes it conceivable that Muslims might one day countenance a rapprochement with a more historical approach to their scriptures. In the meantime, it is sobering to note that Abu Zayd and Rahman were both driven into exile because of the extent of their revisionism, whilst Ayoub's proposal remains marginal at best.<sup>23</sup> The huge

<sup>22</sup> See also Reynolds (2009) and Lawson (2009).

<sup>23</sup> He has the support of Saeed (2014, 129–147). See also the short novel by Hussein (1994), which is an extended Muslim mediation on the crucifixion of Christ.



wrench required by Muslims worldwide to adopt not just one but all three of these positions must at least be acknowledged.

#### 4 Islam's Contestation of Christian Claims

Muslims have overwhelmingly understood their tradition as contesting Christian claims about the divinity and Sonship of Jesus and the Trinitarian nature of God, insisting instead on a straightforwardly prophetic identity of the former and the doctrine of *tawhīd*, the absolute oneness of God. Christians, for their part, have usually heard that message loud and clear and concluded that Muhammad's preaching could not be of divine origin precisely because of its opposition to Christian truth; he must, as Christians of past ages frequently claimed, have been a false prophet.<sup>24</sup> Even for Christians of a more dialogical sort, the Qur'ān is neither the divine voice nor a credible historical source and the many hadith traditions about Jesus which will spring up later in Muslim tradition are even more historically tendentious.

At issue for both Muslims and Christians is the question of whether Christianity is a legitimate development from previous modes of religiosity or a regrettable innovation. Both religions agree that the Christian church is saying something new and other than reiterating the monotheism of the past. Islam summons the world in general and Christians in particular back to the authentic monotheism of Abraham (and Adam), a call which has the christological corollary we have already noted, that Jesus was, and understood himself to be, a prophet of the Muslim sort and nothing more.

That this dispute over the identity of Christ was no peripheral matter for the earliest generations of Muslims is confirmed in monumental form. Among the earliest qur'ānic texts we have still preserved today are the mosaics that decorate the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. Constructed at the end of the seventh century during the reign of Caliph 'Abd al-Malik, the edifice bears a series of qur'ānic fragments pertaining directly to the polemic over the identity of Jesus.<sup>25</sup> That this architectural rebuke to the Christian world should be located on the Temple Mount itself, just hundreds of metres from the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, leaves no room for doubt that the nascent Muslim empire placed matters

<sup>24</sup> For a lengthy treatment of the history of Christian denigration of Islam and Muhammad, see Daniel (1997).

<sup>25</sup> For more on this, see Raby and Johns (1993) and Grabar (2006).

Christological right at the foreground of its self-understanding and, hence, its interreligious concerns.

If Christian-Muslim exchange regarding the identity of Jesus has been largely conflictual, that has not prevented a few Christians from seeking some kind of accommodation with the Muslim interlocutor. Such an accommodation can be sought under a variety of modes and with varying levels of plausibility. Cases of dual belonging, such as that of the American Episcopalian priest, Ann Holmes Redding, are extremely rare and the implicit theology of such a position amounts to little more than a slightly loosened Islamic supersessionism. The project of a revisionist reading of Muslim scriptures is only slightly more promising. The Qur'ān clearly expects its readers to know both biblical and extra-biblical stories about Jesus, as well as many other figures from Old and New Testaments. Its rich intertextuality has encouraged some Christians to read the Qur'ān as originally affirmative of Christian claims. The Italian Franciscan Giulio Basetti-Sani (1977) has attempted such a radical re-reading, taking references to “the prophet,” normally assumed to be Muhammad, actually to refer to Jesus, but his readings are scarcely credible.<sup>26</sup>

For their part, Muslims have rarely been prepared to trust in the textual integrity of the Bible, which they take to have been originally of divine origin and subsequently tampered with, and so the question of its compatibility with the Qur'ān has been dismissed *a priori*. One classical work, *al-Radd al-Jamīl*, attributed to the pen of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1986), stands out as a rare exception to this rule. It takes the Gospel of John and interprets it through an Islamic lens, dismissing the standard Christian interpretation of its christological motifs for being what we would today call fundamentalist: the Christians have taken Jesus's poetic statements of closeness to God too literally and thus falsified the true meaning of their scriptures.<sup>27</sup>

The closest approximation to the thought that the “historical Jesus” rather than the biblical text might be the most secure *locus* of Muslim-Christian reconciliation on Christology is the work of Swiss Catholic theologian, Hans Küng (2007, 495f.). Küng is persuaded of a view that can be traced to Adolf von Harnack (1964), Adolf Schlatter (1926) and others

<sup>26</sup> See also the work of two controversial writers: Lüling (2003), who reads the Qur'ān as a Christian hymnal; and Luxenberg (2007), for whom the real meaning of the Qur'ān can only be grasped once viewed in the light of pre-Islamic Syro-Aramaic terminology of Christian provenance.

<sup>27</sup> See also Massignon (1932).

that Islam is essentially an expression of a Jewish Christianity which endured through the centuries in the deserts of Arabia after the destruction of Jerusalem.<sup>28</sup> The obvious warrant for this position is the Qur'ān's endorsement of Jesus's divinely ordained prophetic mission and refusal to countenance his divinity. Kūng, who is not perturbed by the prospect of relativizing what he sees as the contingently Hellenistic doctrines of orthodox Christianity, regards Islamic Christology as being so close to what was likely the view of the earliest disciples of Christ that to erect a barrier between Islamic and Christian creedal formulations amounts to gratuitous anti-ecumenism. Allied to this irenic position with regard to Jesus is his desire that Christians should affirm the prophethood of Muhammad (2007, 123f.).<sup>29</sup> Thus, by expressing mutual doctrinal recognition and, to some extent, diluting the strongly exclusive claims of the mainstream traditions, the two religious communities will move towards each other in peace and reconciliation.

Whatever one thinks of Kūng's theological argument, it is hard to see it as offering a realistic way forward for world peace as he envisages, especially not in an age when full-blown religious exclusivism and sectarianism are making a come-back. Even if it were, however, his position is vulnerable on a number of fronts.<sup>30</sup> For one thing, it is most unlikely, as Stroumsa (2015, 157) argues, that Jewish Christianity is anything more than one of many contributing influences which fed into the new religion of Islam. There is, after all, much in the Qur'ān that has nothing whatsoever to do with Jewish Christianity. Furthermore, the advent of Muhammad as the "seal of the prophets" is not without its christological implications; for the Qur'ān, Muhammad is the culmination of the cycles of revelation, the one to whom Jesus must now bear witness (Qur'ān 61:6). Moreover, Kūng's whole analysis is based on a somewhat outdated opposition of Hellenism and Semitism.

Contemporary qur'ānic scholarship suggests that there is a better way to understand why biblical material is present in the Qur'ān and which goes some way towards explaining structural elements of the text as well. The ground-breaking work of Angelika Neuwirth (2014) has

<sup>28</sup> For an up-to-date review of the various positions on this still live discussion, see Stroumsa (2015, 139–158).

<sup>29</sup> For a critique of Kūng's argument about Christian recognition of Muhammad's prophecy, see Marshall (2013).

<sup>30</sup> For a solid defence of a vision of the Christian-Muslim relationship which, contrary to Kūng, holds to strong boundaries and clear doctrinal distinctions, see Troll (2009).

transformed how scholars imagine the text to have been assembled. She envisages a primary phase of prophetic preaching in which the model of monotheism and the chain of prophets is propounded (2014, 21–34). Only in a second phase, in which the prophet faces the challenges, questions and protests of a mixed audience of Jews, Christians and others, does he resort to mentioning biblical figures who are then incorporated into the pre-existing mould of his first message. Mention of Jesus is not, therefore, of substantial significance. Rather, it is employed as a way of nullifying Christian claims and ratifying the original prophetology which is the core message of the qur'ānic proclamation. If this analysis is correct, and Neuwirth gives abundant evidence in support of it, surely the project of reconciling biblical with qur'ānic testimony about Jesus appears rather more misguided than at first sight.

But that is not all that needs to be said on the Christian-Muslim element in our discussion. Just because Islam was from the outset a contestation of Christian claims does not mean that it is compelled always to remain so; the authorial intentions that inform a text cannot prevent those self-same texts from taking on a life of their own, as hermeneutical philosophers like to point out. It could be argued, what is more, that the field of historical Jesus research is in fact a potentially fruitful *locus* of suasion for Christian apologetics with regard to Muslims. Not all examples of historical Jesus research have ended up debunking the Christ of faith. The example already cited of N. T. Wright shows that it is at least plausible to invoke the particularities of the Second Temple period context to articulate an essentially Christian understanding of who Jesus thought he was and how it is that a group of ordinary Jewish monotheists came to make the claims they did about Jesus's identification with the God of Israel without, as they saw it, betraying the fundamentals of Jewish belief.<sup>31</sup> One can never argue the case for Jesus's divinity from historical grounds; it is a matter of faith. But one can make the case for this tenet of belief having been seen as a viable option within the horizons of meaning in Jesus's own day. If that is the case, could such historically sensitive articulation of Christian belief not also serve the purpose of explaining the rationality of Christian belief to adherents of Islamic monotheism?

This is indeed an interesting and relatively little explored possibility. The Qur'ān acknowledges Jesus as Christ, *al-masih*, but gives

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<sup>31</sup> For more on the relationship of monotheism to the Christology of the NT, see Bauckham (1998).

no clue as to what this term might signify; effectively, the epithet becomes little more than a husk, a memory of a hugely significant Jewish category, taken up and transformed by the Christ-event, but now side-lined by the preponderant weight of his prophethood. What would it take to make Muslims want to explore the meaning of this title, to engage fully with Jewish and Christian texts and so to come to an understanding that Christian claims about Jesus, whilst not compatible with Muslim belief, nevertheless have a rationale and an intellectual integrity which Muslims have been overwhelmingly reluctant to concede?<sup>32</sup> The answer must be that it would involve an overturn of the two long-held Muslim doctrines of *naskh* and *tahrīf*.<sup>33</sup> *Naskh* is the notion that one part of the Qur'ān can replace and cancel out another which was revealed earlier. The principle then comes to be applied to the relationship between the Qur'ān and earlier revelations such as those given to the Jews and the Christians.<sup>34</sup> *Tahrīf*, we have seen, denotes the idea that those previous revelations have not been preserved from corruption (as has the Qur'ān) but have suffered amendment and therefore cannot be trusted as sources of divine guidance. As long as these doctrines hold sway, Muslims would be ill-advised to engage with the internal thought of another religion; at best they would be wasting their time, at worst exposing themselves to dangerously false teachings.

It is true that some contemporary Muslims have been prepared to argue for the revision of these traditional teachings. Farid Esack (1997) is a notable example of new thinking which seeks to recover an original commitment to pluralism in the sacred text itself and which, its author believes, has been obscured by the rise of a tradition that has re-established patterns of religious exclusivism condemned in the Qur'ān itself.<sup>35</sup> As Abdal Hakim Murad's scathing review of the book (Murad, n.d.) makes clear, this sort of revisionism is freighted with methodological problems for traditional Muslim thought and is most unlikely to command the assent of traditional scholars. It is very hard to see a pluralistic theology of

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<sup>32</sup> The non-scholarly Fatoohy (2009) is a rare example of Muslim engagement with just this title but the aim is the traditional one of advancing the case for Muslim truth over Christian error.

<sup>33</sup> For an overview of the ways in which Muslims approach other religions, see Thomas (2013).

<sup>34</sup> See McAuliffe (1994).

<sup>35</sup> For a fuller treatment of the question of the fate of the non-Muslim in contemporary Islamic thought, see the articles in Khalil, ed. (2013).

religions gaining a consensus among Muslims, which makes it equally hard to envisage the terrain of the historical Jesus being a place where Muslims might discover an empathy for, if not assent to, the reasoning of Christians as well as the deep historical significance of aspects of their own revelation.

## 5 Conclusion

It should by now be clear why the obstacles to the bulk of Muslims and Christians ever agreeing on the identity of Jesus are remote indeed, let alone that they should manage to do so on the terms of the “quest for the historical Jesus.” What is not excluded is that small numbers on either side might judge themselves equipped to make the various manoeuvres necessary and go on to forge an interreligious alliance. The rough profile of the historical Jesus thus achieved would, I propose, be that he was a Jew, the son of Mary and Joseph, who understood himself as standing in the line of the Hebrew prophets, saw his role as re-energising the Judaism of his day in some way and who died on a Roman cross. Such a skeletal account could then be adorned with other elements derived from whichever source is judged to be historically plausible.

There are Christians who count themselves progressive who would be able and willing to sign up to some version of this. Muslims face some acute problems. They would need, we have seen, to be prepared to demythologise the Qur’ān, to “naturalise” their understanding of prophetic revelation and allow that Jesus was crucified. These are not minor concessions. This is not because Muslims take history less seriously than do Christians, just that they understand that historical knowledge can reliably be derived from a text they take to be of divine origin. In fact, it is Christianity which has seen the development of a range of different theological stances that minimise dependence on the historical facticity of the gospel events.<sup>36</sup>

That this “consensus” is meagre religious fare cannot be denied, however. Such a Jesus, crucified, dead and buried but not risen, is an unmitigated failure. Why one should bother following him (whatever that would mean in the circumstances) when the earthly success of Muhammad and his community, not to say the clarity of his prophetic message, was

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<sup>36</sup> Even Wright’s notion of what it meant for Jesus to be conscious of his divinity is somewhat distant from the enchanted theology of the pre-moderns (Wright 2000, 70–93).

within such reach is far from clear. If Küng's counsel were to be heeded in full, recognition, in some unspecified sense, of the prophethood of Muhammad might, in any case, be part of the deal. For a Christian to sign up to such a position could well turn out to be the first step towards entry into Islam. The reconstruction of a long-lost past, we might conclude, is not necessarily a promising point of departure for a journey towards truth and reconciliation.

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