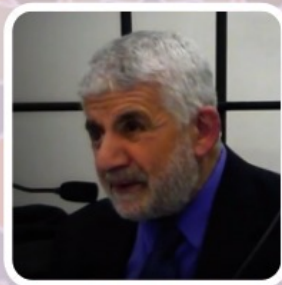


Revelation and Salvation Towards an Islamic View Of History

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Revelation as a relationship of intense involvement of God in human history and of man in the divine challenge as God's viceregent (khalifa) in the earth.

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Revelation and Salvation Towards an Islamic View of History

Mahmoud A. Ayoub

Islam is a conscious act of submission of the creature to the will of the creator. I use the words 'conscious act' deliberately to distinguish between inherent Islam, which is the law of God for all created things in nature, and voluntary Islam, which is the human faith-commitment to affirm the Oneness (*tawhid*) of God and obey His will. Faith and obedience, however, presuppose knowledge and knowledge requires communication.

This communication of the divine will to humankind is what Islam calls *wahi*, or revelation. Yet revelation is not simply the issuance of edicts which must be unquestionably obeyed. It is rather a relationship of intense involvement of God in human history and of man in the divine challenge as God's vice-regent (*khalifa*) in the earth. [1](#)

God, the Qur'an tells us, [2](#) communicates to all creatures what we may call their instincts of survival. He communicates through normative laws to the sun and the moon, to the stars, and to day and night to follow a predetermined course and not to overstep their limits [3](#) In this general sense, all things are 'muslims', submitters to the will of God. This universal Islam is presented in the Qur'an as a challenge to man's willful rejection of faith.

“How would you, humankind, reject faith in God when to Him have submitted all that is in the heavens and on the earth voluntarily and by coercion?” (3:83).

Thus what we term the laws of nature, such as the law of gravity, are according to Islam the ways in which nature expresses its Islam to God.

Angels, like the rest of creation, are muslims by nature or, in some sense, by compulsion. They lack the faculties which distinguish man as a volitional being from the rest of creation. Angels cannot disobey God or commit acts of evil and sin. I believe Satan was not an angel even though, under the influence of Jewish and Christian tradition, some Qur'an commentators and traditionists have argued this only as a possibility.⁴

Nor is Satan's power to do evil beyond the divine will and decree. He is simply given respite

to the day when they (humankind) shall be raised up (15: 28–35).

Hence human evil—the only true evil in the world because it is an act of voluntary choice can be overcome by divine guidance which is the task of prophets, the recipients of divine revelation.

Islam insists, both in the Qur'an and prophetic, *hadith* tradition, that every human being is born with an innate knowledge of God. This knowledge is not so much awareness or information, rather it is a state of innocent faith, a state (*fitra*) of the original creation expressed anew in every child. 'Every child,' the Prophet is said to have declared, 'is born in the (state) of *fitra*; then his parents make him into a Jew, a Christian, or a Magian (i.e., Zoroastrian).'

In another version of the same tradition, the Prophet adds: 'And if (the parents) are Muslims, then a Muslim.'⁵ The Qur'an states, even more precisely, that this state is the:

fitra in which God created humankind, there is no changing of God's creation (30: 30).

Man is therefore created with a primitive but wholesome knowledge of God. The role of the prophets is to guide humanity through revelation to live the full implications of this knowledge.

History is, according to the Islamic view of revelation, the history of God's dealing with humanity through His prophets. Yet revelation in its primordial beginnings belongs to metahistory, the time when we were all in the realm of atoms, ideas in the mind of God. On that primordial day, the Qur'an states,

God took from the children of Adam, from their loins, their progeny and made them bear witness against themselves, saying: 'Am I not your Lord?' They answered: 'Yes, we hear and we witness' (7: 172).

This primordial act of divine revelation was the covenant which God made with all human beings to 'hear and witness' to His absolute sovereignty and lordship over all creation. The rest of human history continues to echo, through the prophets whom God sent to every nation, this divine challenge. History is, moreover, the stage on which we act out our response to this primordial question.

In yet another Qur'anic verse we read:

We have offered the trust (amana) to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they

refuse to bear it and cowered before it. Yet man bore it, for man is truly wrongdoing, foolish (33: 75).

This trust is, according to tradition, divine Oneness with all the implications of this knowledge for human life and history.

Man is foolish not because he is unable to bear the trust he voluntarily chose to bear, but rather because he continuously wrongs his own soul by knowingly breaking his covenant with God through the sin of association (shirk) of other things with Him, yet God is All-Merciful and Compassionate. In His infinite mercy, He called man time and again back to Him. This He did through a long series of prophets from Adam to Muhammad whose number was, according to tradition, 124,000.

This divine insistence on our salvation through prophetic guidance implies two important but paradoxical principles. It implies first that man is a sinner, capable of great evil. The second principle is that man is nonetheless God's viceregent in the earth whose ideal goal is prophetic existence.

These two principles are dramatically expressed in the Qur'anic portrayal of Adam as the crown of creation before whom angels had to bow down in respectful obeisance. In contrast, the Qur'an portrays Adam and Eve as disobedient sinners begging for divine mercy and forgiveness.⁶

The story of Adam's creation, fall and restoration as related in the Qur'an is an instructive commentary on the biblical account which the Qur'an accepts in its broad outlines. When God decided to create Adam, He announced to the angels:

'I am about to make a viceregent in the earth.' The angels protested: 'Will you place in it one who would spread corruption in it and shed blood while we proclaim Your praise and sanctify You?'

Then God ***told Adam all the names***, which may be regarded as the first act of divine revelation to man in history. God then challenged the angels to name the things whose identities

He revealed to His viceregent, but they admitted their ignorance and sought God's mercy.

'Praise be to you, we have no knowledge save that which You taught us....' (2:32)

Adam, who was taught by God the art of language with all its symbolism, was higher than the angels. Thus they were ordered to prostrate themselves before him in veneration, not worship; they all did

except Iblis (Satan) who refused and was puffed up with pride (2: 34).'⁷

In an interesting colloquy between God and Satan, reported in the Qur'an, we see both the reason for man's exultation and for Satan's pride. God asks Iblis:

'What prevented you from prostrating yourself before one whom I fashioned with my two hands . . . ?' Satan answered: 'I am better than he; you created him of clay and created me of fire' (38:

Thus God expelled the arrogant Satan from his presence and placed Adam in the garden of Paradise.

Adam, however, was made not for Paradise but for the earth. God therefore gave Satan authority over Adam and his descendants in order that the eternal battle between good and evil should rage on its legitimate stage, earth. Adam was tempted by Satan with eternal life, everlasting dominion and angelic existence. He fell and was sent with his spouse to the earth to exercise their true mission, God's viceregency.

From the beginning, God created the human soul and

inspired it with its evil and piety (91:6-7).

Thus man is as prone to evil and destruction as he is to righteousness and good deeds. With this choice, however, go sin and repentance, and forgiveness and guidance. Adam did disobey his Lord, but then he

received certain words from his Lord and He turned towards him, for He is truly relenting, compassionate (2: 36).

Thus Adam sinned and was guided back to God by God through revelation. Adam was both the first sinner but also the first prophet. Every man and woman thereafter carries in him or herself the same potential.

This is not to say that every human being is a prophet, but that the goal of humanity is life with God. Nowhere more powerfully and aesthetically has this ideal been interiorized and presented than in the lives and works of the mystics, the friends (*awliya'*) of God, whom we call Sufis.

It has already been observed that every human individual is born in the state (*fitra*) of innate faith in God as the one and only creator and sovereign lord of all beings. What then, it must be asked, is the role of the prophets in human history? Their role is twofold, first to remind men of their covenant with God, or bring them back to the state of pure faith.

Man, according to the Qur'an, is a forgetful creature. The Qur'an was sent, as were other scriptures, from God as a reminder. Indeed, one of the many names of the Qur'an is al-Dhikr (the remembrance). The second task of the prophets, or to be more precise, the prophet-messengers, is to transmit divine precepts or moral imperatives which are to regulate human conduct. In Islam, this is known as the *shari'a*, or sacred law.

Islam distinguishes between a prophet and a messenger, and between these and the righteous friends (*awliya'*) of God. A prophet is one who receives revelation in dreams and by other indirect means. He may be sent to only a few people and for a specific purpose, or he may be a prophet in himself. In contrast, a messenger is one who receives direct revelation through an angel, or even more directly from

God, as was the case with Moses.

A messenger, in addition, is a legislator. Every messenger (*rasul*) is a prophet (*nabi*) but not every prophet is a messenger. This is because the main distinction between the two rests not on revelation, but on the promulgation and application of sacred laws based on revealed divine principles.

Among the 124,000 prophets, tradition asserts that there were 313 messengers. The Qur'an refers to eighteen, five of whom are known as *ulu-al-'azm*, or messengers with power or resolve. These are: Noah, the father of humanity after the Deluge; Abraham, the archetypal man of faith in the one God; Moses, the recipient of the Torah; Jesus, the Word of God and His spirit and the recipient of the Evangel; and Muhammad, the recipient of the Qur'an, the seal of the prophets and last messenger to humankind. Moses and Muhammad, however, occupy a special place in prophetic history because they were prophets and statesmen. They did not simply transmit the message, they implemented it in the life of a socio-political order.

Islamic tradition insists that God never left any community without

a warner, in order that men should have no argument or contention (hujja) against God after the apostles (4: 165).

The question was inevitably asked: What becomes of humanity in times of prophetic interruption (*fatra*), and even more seriously after prophecy has ceased altogether? Several answers to this question have appeared in the form of minority sects in Islam, some of which, like the Bahais, broke away completely from the community. What may be termed the 'orthodox' Shi'i answer has been more or less tolerated as a fifth way (*madhhab*) alongside the four official Sunni schools.

Based on a complex system of Qur'an exegesis and prophetic *hadith* tradition, Shi'i Muslims early in the community's history posited another cycle concentric with that of prophethood and extending beyond it. This is the cycle of *walaya*, (authority or allegiance) or *imama* (temporal and spiritual headship) of the Muslim community.

The imams must always be physical as well as spiritual heirs to the prophets. With the exception of Jesus whose first heir or viceregent (*wasi*) was Simon Peter, the imam must be a brother or descendent of the Prophet. The imam may also be a prophet, as was the case of Abraham.⁹ But in general, the imamate is higher than prophethood and below apostleship.

The imam is the bearer of the knowledge of the prophet whom he succeeds and by prophetic inheritance from one prophet to the next, the imam is also heir to the knowledge of all previous prophets. His task is not to promulgate new laws, rather it is to interpret, safeguard and implement the *shari'a* of the prophet of whom he is the heir. Like prophets, the imams must be protected (*ma'sum*) by God from error. They must also manifest miracles as proof of their imamate.

The doctrine of the imamate no doubt evolved as part of the general loyalty of an important segment of the Muslim community to 'Ali (the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet) and his descendents. As a result of complex historical circumstances which cannot be considered here, the Shi'a (followers) of 'Ali and devotees of the ahl al-bayt (household) of the Prophet Muhammad, built an impressive philosophy of history and a tragic ethos around the personalities of the imams. For the purpose of this discussion, it must be observed that while the imams are not recipients of revelation, they are *muhaddathun* (i.e., spoken to) by angels. [10](#)

More importantly, the imamate is a necessary extension of prophethood. Without it, revelation remains unfulfilled beyond the time of the prophet to whom the revelation was sent. Of course, Shi'i Muslims in all this had the Qur'an in mind. But it was inevitable that a universal doctrine of the imamate had to evolve to fit the Islamic universal doctrine of prophethood and revelation. [11](#)

I spoke earlier of Abraham as the 'archetypal man of faith'. He exhibits in the Qur'an and Islamic tradition a robust and dynamic personality. More significantly, however, Abraham typifies man's spiritual journey from that primal state (*fitra*) of innocent faith in God to doubt, then to faith, and finally to absolute certainty. From a contemplative observation at night of the universe around him, Abraham deduced that it must have a lord.

He first took the moon, on account of its splendour, to be that Power. But the moon set and Abraham cried with disappointment: ***'I do not love those that set.'***

He then saw the sun, even more luminous and of much greater magnitude. Abraham exclaimed: ***'This is my lord, this is greater!'*** But when the sun also set, he exclaimed:

'O my people, I dissociate myself from what you do' (7: 76 8).

Finally, in an outburst of divine illumination, Abraham cried out:

'I turn my face to Him who created the heavens and the earth, a man of pure faith, nor am I one of the Associators [i.e., of other things with God]' (6: 79).

It was after this discovery of the truth by his unaided reason that Abraham received revelation. He discovered God, as it were, then God guided him and granted him the gift of prophethood, then chose him as His intimate friend (*khalil*) and finally appointed him as the imam (leader) of humankind. It is perhaps not fortuitous that Abraham, the father of prophets and first muslim, left us no specific corpus of revelation. '

The scrolls of Abraham' are mentioned in the Qur'an, [12](#) but tradition asserts that they were lost. Abraham left no revelation of his own because he belongs to all revelation. He is the hero and maker of revelation-history rather than its guide. The mission of Muhammad and the Qur'an was to call men to the pure (*hanif*) faith of Abraham, who was neither a Jew nor a Christian but a man of pure faith, a muslim, that is, a submitter to God. [13](#)

The Qur'an is, for Muslims, the final revelation to humankind. Before discussing the nature of the Qur'an and its relationship to human history, it may be well to say a word about the life and character of Muhammad and the manner of the revelation of the Qur'an to him. Mecca before Islam was a thriving commercial city in north Arabia lying on the trade route between Syria in the west and south Arabia and India in the east. Mecca also housed the ancient shrine of the Ka'aba, which was an important place of pilgrimage and a lucrative source of income for the city. With the rise of material wealth, morals declined so that sensitive men and women rejected the idolatry of their society and its moral turpitude.

They either turned to Judaism or Christianity, or privately worshipped God in anticipation of a new prophet who would usher in a new era. It was in this highly charged atmosphere that Muhammad, son of 'Abd Allah, was born in 570 or 71 AD. Muhammad lost his parents in infancy and was cared for by his grandfather, 'Abd al-Muttalib, and when he died, he was cared for by his uncle, Abu Talib.

Muhammad was, according to tradition, a man of mild and contemplative nature. At the age of 25, he married a rich widow, Khadija, who stood by him until she died about ten years later. Khadija had a Christian cousin named Waraqa b. Nawfal who may have been well-versed in scriptures. Tradition tells us that Waraqa could read and write both Hebrew and Arabic and that he read the Gospel in Hebrew and translated it into Arabic.

At the beginning of Muhammad's prophetic career when he was uncertain of the source and nature of his revelation, he found great support in this Christian man who on seeing him and hearing what he had to say, cried out: 'Holy, holy! Verily by Him in whose hand is Waraqa's soul, . . . there has come unto him the greatest Naimus (law) who came to Moses aforetime, and lo, he is the prophet of this people.' Soon, however, Waraqa died. [14](#)

Every year, we are told, Muhammad used to leave his home during the month of Ramadan for Ghar Hira, a cave on a mountain outside Mecca. There he spent his nights in devotion and contemplation until one day an angel appeared to him, later identified as Gabriel, the angel of revelation, who communicated the first five verses of the Qur'an:

(1) Recite in the name of your Lord who created (2) created man from a blood clot. (3) Recite, for your Lord is most magnanimous, (4) Who taught by the pen. (5) He taught man that which he knew not (95: 1-5).

After a brief interruption, revelations continued to come, warning the Meccans of the coming day of judgement and calling them to moral righteousness and the worship of the one and only God.

(1) Have you considered him who cries lies to the faith? (2) It is he who repulses the orphan; (3) nor does he urge the feeding of the needy. (4) Woe to them that pray, (5) but are negligent in their prayers; (6) they who act hypocritically, (7) and withhold the utensil (102).

In this brief sura of the Qur'an is expressed the entire message of the Book. The message is to have

faith in God and manifest this faith through worship and good works.

In Mecca, this message was couched in a powerful, eschatological language. When, however, the Prophet and a small band of his followers migrated to Medina in 622 AD, the message was expressed in normative moral and religious precepts necessary for the regulation of a socio-political and religious community. These norms were to provide the primary source of Muslim sacred law, the *shari'a*. By the time the Prophet died in 10 AH/632 AD, all the fundamentals of Islam and its rites of worship were instituted. In one of the last verses of the Qur'an to be revealed, God says:

I have perfected your religion for you; I have completed my favour towards you, and have accepted Islam as a religion for you (5: 3).

The Qur'an was revealed over a period of twenty-two years during Muhammad's prophetic career, first for twelve years in Mecca as a warner and preacher, then the remaining ten in Medina as a warner, preacher, prophet, and statesman. Thus we can see how the Qur'an is intimately related to the life of an actual society. Yet the Qur'an is also the transcendent Word of God, preserved from eternity in

the well-guarded tablet (85: 21-2).

It is at once a book of guidance sent down by God through the angel Gabriel, who actually taught it to Muhammad, and a numinous power

sent down upon your (Muhammad's) heart (26: 194).

Two modes of revelation are described by tradition. The first is the direct communication by the angel to the Prophet who then dictated the verses or suras to scribes as he did not know how to read or write. The second mode is a sound which the Prophet heard in his ears, while in a trancelike state, a sound like the ringing of a bell. 'This,' the Prophet said, 'was the hardest for me to bear.'¹⁵ This is the Qur'an in its primordial essence, unfettered by human sounds and letters. It is the Qur'an as it is 'in the Mother of the Book,' the archetypal source of revelation.

The Qur'an is, for Muslims, the literal and timeless divine Word which entered our time. It became a book which Muslims write down, memorize, recite, and live by. The Qur'an is therefore analogous to Christ in Christianity, who is the eternal Logos that **was made flesh and dwelt among us (John 1: 14)**.

Yet with this similarity, there is an essential difference. Christ is God's self-revelation or disclosure through incarnation. Hence, **the Word was with God and the Word was God (John 1: 1)**. The Qur'an, on the other hand, is the revelation of God's will and purpose for humanity.

Although the Qur'an shares in divine transcendence, God remains the wholly other, absolutely transcendent lord over his entire creation. This crucial difference has, as we shall see, set the two communities of faith far apart, thus making any meaningful dialogue between them a hard challenge to the principles of love and tolerance which are basic to the faith of both communities.

The analogy of the Qur'an with Christ may be carried a step further into the history of Muslims and Christians. The christological controversies which so intensely engaged the Fathers of the early Church were paralleled in early Muslim history by theological controversies regarding the createdness or eternity of the Qur'an. In both cases, the issue was the relationship of the revelation to the revealer, and hence the fear of compromising the unity and transcendence of God.

Furthermore, as the Church has through the ages been occupied with the humanity of Christ, so have Muslims been occupied with the question of earthliness, or humanity, of the Qur'an. In my view, neither community has been able to recognize the full implication of the humanity of the revelation even though in both cases the man Jesus and the earthly Qur'an have imposed themselves so powerfully on our history and theology.

For Muslims, this is clear from the fact that the Qur'an followed the course of their formative history with an amazing intimacy. It dealt with the community's hopes and failures; it consoled the Prophet and his people and reproached them. Of even greater significance has been the fact that many of its verses were revealed in answer to specific problems or questions of individual Muslims. Thus the occasions or reasons (*asbab*) of the revelation (*nuzul*) of the Qur'an has become an important branch of the sciences of the Qur'an.

Having considered the Islamic view of revelation as it relates to the Qur'an, we shall now consider more specifically the Qur'anic view of previous revelation. The Qur'an asserts that to every nation or community God sent an apostle to convey to them the message of his lord in their own tongue. Thus what has been said regarding the Qur'an applies to all scriptures.

They were all with God, preserved in a celestial archetype which the Qur'an calls umm al-kitab (Mother of the Book). The truth they contain is, moreover, one and the same: to have faith in God alone and not associate any other thing or being with Him, to worship God, and to do good works. Differences, when they exist, are simply due to the variety in human culture and historical circumstances.

Each messenger had to let the message entrusted to him by God speak the truth as it relates to the condition of his people. It may be further argued that inasmuch as all the major revelations are meant for humanity in the various stages of its progress, revelation must also be progressive so as to speak meaningfully to the human condition at every stage of its history. Thus details relating to laws of sanction and prohibition in one revelation could be changed or abrogated by a subsequent one. Jesus thus claims in the Qur'an,

'I have come to make lawful for you (the Jews) some of the things that were unlawful' (3: 50).

This process, however, stopped with the Qur'an. Thereafter men are to understand and apply the precepts of this final revelation in their lives. Henceforth God's guidance will be through inspiration and not revelation.

The Qur'an deals only with the Torah of Moses and the Gospel of Jesus as specific instances of revelation. Christians and Jews are called '**people of the book**,' an appellation which applies indirectly to Muslims as well:

Say, O people of the book, come to a common word [of agreement] between you and us that we worship no one beside God ... (3: 64).

The Qur'an further asserts that in the Gospel

... there is guidance and light (5: 44).

So it adds:

Let therefore the people of the Gospel judge in accordance with what was revealed in it, (5: 47).

The Qur'an further challenges Muhammad and the Jews who came to ask him to judge among them,

How could they make you a judge over them when they have the Torah in which is the judgement of God? (5: 43).

If the Torah, the Gospel and the Qur'an are one in their message and purpose, they why are they so different in reality and why are the three communities of faith in such discord among themselves? These differences, the Qur'an asserts, are due to the fact that some of the Jews and Christians have willfully altered

words from their rightful places (4: 46).

This accusation of *tahrif* (altering or distorting) by the Jews and the Christians of their own sacred books has played an unfortunate role in Muslim–Jewish–Christian polemics.

The problem of *tahrif* is a very complex one which cannot be discussed in this general essay. It must be observed, however, that the Qur'an seems to suggest that such alteration or distortion was more of the interpretation or meaning rather than the actual text of the Torah and Gospel. An example of this misinterpretation is the verses in both scriptures referring to the coming of Muhammad and which were given different interpretations by the scholars–priests and rabbis of the two communities. [16](#)

Another and even more serious example of Christian misinterpretation of the message and personality of Christ is their assertion that Christ is God or the Son of God. [17](#)

All this notwithstanding, the Qur'an still leaves much room for dialogue and amity among the faithful of the three communities. It was unfortunately not the scriptures of the three communities that were called upon to judge and decide among their people; but rather political, economic, and military exigencies were to determine the relations among Muslims, Christians and Jews.

The Qur'an never criticized the faith of Christians and Jews, or Judaism and Christianity as such. Rather it always qualifies its statements with: *Some among the people of the book . . . or a group of the people of the book ...*, and so on. Later tradition could not be satisfied with such an open relationship.

Thus *tahrif* was taken to mean an actual change of the text of the scriptures through interpolations and deletions. In an interesting, *hadith* the Prophet says: 'Do not believe the people of the book nor disbelieve them. Rather say, we believe in that which was sent down to us.'¹⁸ This ambivalence towards the people of the book is even less apparent in the Qur'an. In several places the Qur'an invokes previous scriptures and their people to argue for its own claim to authenticity. Thus the Qur'an addresses Muhammad:

If you are in doubt concerning that which we have sent down to you, then ask those who have been reading the book before you ... (10: 194).

The Qur'an similarly enjoins the Muslims:

Ask the people of remembrance (ahl al-dhikr) if you do not know (16: 43).

The people of remembrance are the people of the scriptures which the Qur'an often designates as the Remembrance.¹⁹

Every religious tradition, or at least the three with which we are here concerned, must in the end see itself as in some way the last word of divine truth or revelation to humanity. Islam adopted an open and unique attitude to previous religious traditions and their revelations, an attitude made necessary by the Islamic view of history as revelation–history.

Since revelation ceased with the Qur'an, and apostleship with Muhammad, Islam has seen itself as the final confirmation and fulfillment of all previous revelations. By dint of geographic and cultural proximity of the Muslim community to Christians and Jews, this openness and challenge had to be directed at the people of the book. Thus it was inevitable that conflict would arise.

The Qur'an sees itself not only as dependent for its own claim to authenticity on the Torah and the Gospel, but also as 'confirming' the truth which they contain and superceding them. This view which the Qur'an holds of itself and the attitude it evinced within the Muslim community of Medina led to sharp and tragic conflict with the well-established Jewish community. This in turn resulted in open hostility on both sides.

The Qur'an exhibits greater hostility towards the Jews than towards the Christians but here again it may be argued that this hostility was directed towards the Jews of Medina with whom the Prophet and early Muslim community had many political and economic problems. The Qur'an admits the favour of God towards the children of Israel and their covenant with Him, but rejects the Jewish notion of chosenness and exclusivity. This problem, I believe, is older than Islam. It was quite prevalent in the earlier culture of

the Syro-Aramaic Near East and is reflected even in the Gospel.[20](#)

The contrast between the Qur'anic treatment of the Jews and Christians may be best seen in a late verse revealed in the context of much Jewish-Muslim conflict in a still nascent and imperiled Muslim community. The verse reads:

You would find the greatest of hostility among men towards those who have faith to be Jews and those who have associated (other things with God); and you would find the nearest of them in love towards those who have faith to be those who say, 'We are Christians.' This is because there are among them pastors and monks; nor do they act arrogantly (5: 82).

But by the Jews, the Qur'an intended those of Medina, and by the Christians those of Abyssinia and their legendary king, al-Najashi (Nagus), who received Muslims well when they had to flee Mecca in the first Muslim migration.[21](#)

Every sacred book, be it the Qur'an, Torah or Gospel, is open to many kinds of interpretation in accordance with our increased knowledge of one another and the historical circumstances which we together share. The ancient biblical promise to the Jews of Zion has been interpreted both spiritually and politically.

The political ramifications of that interpretation are still very much with us. Likewise, the Gospel parable of the king's wedding feast[22](#) gave St. Augustine scriptural authority to argue for the compulsion of the Donatist back to the Church even if coercion were necessary. Sufis have often interpreted the Qur'anic verses enjoining the faithful to strive in the way of God with the sword to mean striving against the evil in one's own heart and soul with the sword of truth.

They found clear support in prophetic *hadith* for this view which called the *jihad* against the carnal soul 'the greater *jihad*.' The Qur'an also distinguishes between the *jihad* in the way of God and *jihad* in God, where God says:

And those who strive in Us, We shall guide them to our ways (29:69).

The ways of God are designated by another verse as the:

ways of peace (51:16).

The ancient divine promise of guidance in the face of evil and sin was made not only to Adam and his spouse but to all their progeny after them. Guidance in Islam is analogous to the Holy Spirit in Christianity.

God will still guide those who seek peace to understand His revelations and learn from them. In our world of great possibilities for a better life of health and plenty or total devastation, we need to interpret our scriptures in ways that promote a meaningful dialogue which would lead to a true fellowship of faith.

He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8 (RSV)).

You will know the truth and the truth will make you free (John 8:32)

. ... *Guidance shall come from me to you, and whoever follows My guidance, no fear shall come upon them, nor will they grieve(2:38).*

- [1.](#) See 2: 30.
- [2.](#) See 16:68.
- [3.](#) See 36: 40.
- [4.](#) See Ayoub, The Qur'an and its Interpreters, 1, New York: SUNY Press, 1983, ad 2: 30–34.
- [5.](#) Sahih Muslim, 3rd ed.. Beirut: Dar al-Fikr. 1398/1978. XVI, 210
- [6.](#) See Ayoub, op. cit., 1, ad 2:30–38.
- [7.](#) See the previous footnote.
- [8.](#) See also 7: 12.
- [9.](#) See 2: 123.
- [10.](#) Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn Ya'qub ibn Ishaq al-Kulayni al-Razi, Al-Usul min al-kafi, 3rd ed., Tehran: Dar al-Kutub al-Islamiyya. 1388, I, 174 6.
- [11.](#) For a useful summary of the doctrine of the imamate, see M. Ayoub, Redemptive Suffering in Islam: a Study of the Devotional Aspects of 'Ashura' in Twelver Shi'ism, The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1978, pp. 5348; and Henri Corbin, 'De la philosophie prophetique en Islam Shi'ite', Eranos Jarbuch, xxx (1962), 49–1 16
- [12.](#) See 82: 18–1 9
- [13.](#) 3:67. On Abraham in the Islamic tradition see Kenneth Cragg, The Privilege of Man, London: University of London, Athlone Press, 1968, ch. 3; and Youakim Moubarac. Abraham dans le Coran, Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1958.
- [14.](#) A. Guillaume. The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishaqs Sirat Rasul Allah. 3rd ed.. Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1970, p. 170.
- [15.](#) 'Imad al-Din Abu 'l-Fida' Isma'il b. Kathir, Al-sira al-nabawiya, Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifa, 1396/1971, I, 421.
- [16.](#) See Guillaume, op. cit., p. 103; and Ali b. Rabban al-Tabari, Al-din wa'l dawla, 3rd ed., Beirut: Dar al-Afaq al-Jadida, 1979. (The book has also been translated into English under the title Religion and the Empire.)
- [17.](#) See Q. 5: 17, 73. and 116.
- [18.](#) Sahih al-Bukhari, Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, n.d., v, 150.
- [19.](#) See 15:9 and 21: 105
- [20.](#) See J. Spencer Trimingham, Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times, London: Longman, 1979, pp. 41 49. See also Matt 3: 9.
- [21.](#) See Guillaume. op. cit., pp. 146–50.
- [22.](#) See Luke 14: 16–24

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