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This text highlights the "deep veneration" towards Jesus in Islam, emphasizing that belief in his prophetic mission is a fundamental part of the Islamic faith and encouraging grounded dialogue between Christians and Muslims alike. To address theological differences regarding the Trinity and Jesus' divinity, the analyses the five distinct corrective methods used by the Quran: (1) removing causes of misunderstanding, (2) calling for reflection on his human nature, (3) offering gentle advice, (4) relaying Jesus' own words, and (5) highlighting the serious implications of attributing divinity to him.

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Jesus In The Qur'an

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Abstract

Qur'an may come as a surprise to many Christians. But this does not imply that the Qur'anic worldview accepts all the core beliefs of the Christian faith. As the author of this article points out, the Qur'an strongly objects to the Christian beliefs of Jesus' divinity, his filial relationship with God, and the concept of Trinity since these beliefs oppose the Islamic insistence on God's absolute transcendence.

However, unlike its engagement with other faith groups, the Qur'anic response to the Christians is multifarious and this forms the main subject matter of this article. In it, the author attempts to categorize the Qur'an's engagement with the Christians regarding their beliefs. As the author shows, instead of ignoring the issue completely or categorically condemning it, the Qur'an uses at least five different methods in its attempt to correct what it considers 'deviant beliefs.' This in itself is a sign of God's mercy and attentiveness to the Christian faith group.

Keywords: Jesus, Qur'an, interfaith studies, Islam, Christianity, exegesis, Trinity, divinity.

Introduction

The title "Jesus in the Qur'an" is perceived in different ways by Muslims and Christians. Setting aside the small group of Christian scholars who have paid a great deal of attention to Islamic issues and who have exerted substantial effort into understanding the true nature of Islam, most Christians may imagine that any work with a title such as "Jesus in the Qur'an" must deal with a Qur'anic perspective on something outside the Islamic faith, since according to them, Muslims can consider themselves Muslim regardless of their belief about Jesus ('a). But this is incorrect since believing in Jesus as a prophet is a fundamental part of the Islamic faith.

All Muslims are required to believe in the divinely appointed prophets – including Adam ('a), Noah ('a), Abraham ('a), Moses ('a), Jesus ('a), and culminating in Muhammad (S). For the Qur'an says in describing those who are righteous:

وَالَّذِينَ يُؤْمِنُونَ بِمَا أُنْزِلَ إِلَيْكَ وَمَا أُنْزِلَ مِنْ قَبْلِكَ وَبِآخِرَةٍ هُمْ يُوقِنُونَ

"And they believe in what has been sent down to thee and what has been sent down before thee"
(2:4).¹

This is an example of a more general issue that has become a major hurdle in the field of interreligious studies. To better understand this problem, let us turn our attention to other fields of knowledge. In these fields, authors usually do not need to pay a great deal of attention to the background of their reader; it is not an element which greatly influences the method and content of their discussion. It suffices for them to indicate, in their introduction, what basic preliminary knowledge is required for the reader to understand the content of their research and on what level the work has been created. In contrast, for scholars writing in the field of inter-religious studies, the identity of the reader or audience is crucial in most, if not all, cases. It is important for such an author to know both the faith background and the level of knowledge which the reader brings to the work. That is why, more than in any other branch of knowledge, we see that authors who write about a faith other than their own or try to introduce their own faith to others, mention for whom a given work has been produced.

This fact is due to a number of reasons, the discussion of all of which takes us far from the topic of this paper. To allude to it, however, one such reason is that if one were to read a work on something other than his own religion, misunderstanding is highly probable because the reader tries, sometimes subconsciously, to understand an issue about the other faith in the context of his own faith. As an example, a Muslim or Christian might consider the role of the mosque in Islam to be entirely identical to the role of the church in Christianity, but this is far from the case.

A clearer example for the difference in Muslim and Christian understandings is the Gospel itself.² Based on Qur'anic teachings, Muslims believe that the Gospel, like the Torah and the Qur'an that were revealed to Moses ('a) and Muhammad (S) respectively, is a book which was directly revealed to Jesus ('a), a point which is surprising to most Christians. Muslims are equally surprised when they are informed that Christians do not know of any book revealed to Jesus himself.

The title of this paper, "Jesus in the Qur'an," is not an exemption with regard to this issue. A Christian who is not a scholar of Islam might think that if "Christ" had been chosen in the title instead of "Jesus," the connotation would be different, since for him the former elevates the status of Jesus to divinity. Therefore, as far as a Christian is concerned, the word "Christ" has theological implications which the word "Jesus" does not; but for a Muslim, using "Christ" instead of "Jesus" has no such implications, a point which shall be discussed later. Likewise, one might imagine that the role of the Qur'an in Islam is the same as the role of the Gospel in Christianity, which it is not.

This article has been written with a Christian audience in mind who has only a surface understanding of Islam. Although the different words and their connotations cannot be explained in every case that they arise, as that would take away from the main focus of the article, an effort has been made to do so when necessary.

As we know, the verses of the Qur'an regarding Jesus have been discussed frequently by Muslims and Christians from different perspectives, some of which have been criticized by the Qur'an itself. The Qur'an does not limit itself to presenting its own view on Jesus, rather, it mentions and takes a stand against some of the other views as well. For Muslims, the Qur'an acts as a guideline for Islamic thought, and not just on the issue of Jesus.³ These guidelines have provided Muslims with insightful viewpoints as well as answers when confronted in a debate on the Islamic position.

With this in mind, this paper will attempt to categorize the Qur'anic verses on Jesus in a novel manner. An observant reader will be able to discern how, in addition to offering direction to explain one's view, the Qur'an also provides a Muslim with certain guidelines for reasoning in the face of an opposing view. Needless to say, all of the more than ninety verses of the Qur'an pertaining to Jesus cannot be incorporated into an article such as this. Therefore, the more prominent ones will be selected and discussed in a manner that will sufficiently cover the major aspects of Jesus in the Qur'an. Nevertheless, prior to this a brief introduction of the Qur'an as well as a quick illustration of the Qur'anic perspective on Jesus Christ is necessary.

According to the Islamic faith, the Qur'an was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (S) over a period of twenty-three years in 114 chapters about fourteen-hundred years ago. Although the Prophet is known to have performed other miracles, the Qur'an itself is the most important one regarding which God states:

قُلْ لَئِنْ أَجْتَمَعَتِ الْإِنْسُونَ وَالْجِنُّ عَلَىٰ أَنْ يَأْتُوا بِمِثْلِ هَذَا الْقُرْءَانِ لَا يَأْتُونَ بِمِثْلِهِ وَلَوْ كَانَ بَعْضُهُمْ لِيَعْضُلُ بَعْضًا ظَهِيرًا

"If the men and jinns banded together to produce the like of the Qur'an, they would never produce its like, even if they assisted one another" (17:88).

God also strongly emphasizes that there is no internal inconsistency among the 6236 verses of the Qur'an⁴ and denies that the Qur'anic content is in any way mythical.⁵ The Qur'an also stresses that it is composed in a language that is clear and understandable⁶ for all those whose intention is to understand.⁷ As a side note, this is not to say that it is not possible for those with ill-intentions to interpret the Qur'an in accordance with their own motives. The revelation of the Qur'an was completed during the life of the prophet⁸ who recommended that Muslims use it to guide them at any crossroad.

Most importantly, for Muslims the Qur'an is the word of God verbatim, and this is a point on which there is a consensus among Muslims. Not surprisingly, some recent Christian scholars have come to admit the Qur'an as the most historically accurate of scriptures that have been revealed to different faiths. It should, therefore, be clear that the role of the Qur'an for Muslims as a unique undistorted revealed text is different from how a Christian views the Gospel or the Bible. In Christianity, such a focal role is given to Jesus himself as opposed to the Bible.

What has been said so far is agreed upon by all Muslims whether Sunni or Shia. This is because the points alluded to are based on the Qur'anic verses themselves. Therefore, regardless of their differences, Sunnis and Shias are generally in agreement to those matters which are central to the Islamic faith, such as the nature of the Qur'an itself. However, that is not to say that no Muslim scholar has ever said or will ever say something other than what we outlined above. This point needs further explanation because it provides us with an answer to the question which might be asked concerning this article's use of phrases like 'the Islamic view' or 'consensus among Muslims' on a given Islamic issue, including the issue of Jesus.

The Meaning Of The Term 'Consensus'

One of the unfortunate realities for Muslims in the modern world is that very few of its distinguished scholars have written or do write in English. By the same token, very few Christian scholars know Arabic or Persian. This deficiency provides the perfect opportunity for some modernized Muslims with a good command of English to raise ideas alien to Islam which, unfortunately, are well received by some Christian scholars. That they should be so received is not surprising, because some of these ideas are in harmony with a Christian perspective towards Islam.

Therefore, they can be used both as good evidence for an ungrounded Christian idea about Islam, and also as evidence of a split among Muslims on the issue. A parallel example might be the following: If a Christian scholar were to accept the Gospel of Barnabas, this would be well received among Muslims since this Gospel is compatible with the Qur'anic perspective of Jesus. But as Cantwell Smith reminds us, "no statement about a religion is valid unless it can be acknowledged by that religion's believers".⁹

We do not have the opportunity here to explain all the reasons and incentives for some modernized Muslims or Christians to express views which are absolutely contrary to the consensus of their own faith (perhaps one reason being that it provides common ground for dialogue with other faiths or with the secular perspective). On this account, if a so-called Muslim scholar were to state that the Qur'an was *not* the verbatim word of God, this does not break the consensus among Muslims on the issue; this is similar to the consensus that Christians have regarding the crucifixion of Christ which is not broken if a so-called Christian scholar were to question it.

These sorts of unorthodox ideas are found far more commonly among Christian scholars discussing their faith than among Muslim scholars. As another example, in his book *Christianity Must Change or Die*, Bishop John Shelby Spong crosses almost all traditional Christian lines and disputes almost all Christian doctrines, including the virgin birth of Jesus.¹⁰ In brief, setting aside the fact that some so-called scholars would better be called semi-scholars or pseudo-scholars, we should keep in mind that not all opinions of scholars are in fact "scholarly" opinions.

If one wanted to urge that such ideas do break the consensus, one would have to admit that the only point Christians believe in common is that they have nothing to believe in common. In that case, terms like "Christian doctrine" or "Islamic doctrine" should be removed from usage, since for any given doctrine, one can always find a scholar who rejects that doctrine as Christian or Islamic.

At any rate, one can predict that modern and postmodern scholars who show contempt for the ability to gain access to truth will keep identifying so-called consensus-breaking ideas on both the Christian and the Muslim sides. In sum, one should not be sensitive to words like "consensus" or "Muslims believe" or "the Qur'an says" as we use those terms in the paper. Whenever there is a significant disagreement on a given issue it will be pointed out.

Brief Picture Of Jesus In The Qur'an

It is a truism that the opinion of Christian scholars towards the Qur'an and Islam varies over a wide range, from admitting that Muhammad (S) was a real prophet to rejecting him as a liar. In spite of this wide diversity of views, all Christian scholars admit that the Qur'an shows a "deep veneration" towards Jesus ('a) and that it portrays him with great reverence, a point which is surprising to most Christians. The Qur'an speaks of Jesus using three different designations: Jesus (22 times); Jesus, the son of Mary (13 times); and the Messiah (11 times). Like Muhammad (S) Jesus ('a) is admired in the Qur'an as being of exceptional holiness. According to the Qur'an, Jesus was born of the virgin Mary¹¹ and miraculously

announced his prophetic mission when he was in his cradle.[12](#)

The Qur'an calls him the *Kalimat Allah* (Word of God) and *Ruh Allah* (Spirit of God)[13](#), two attributes not used for any other prophet in the Qur'an. Jesus Christ is affirmed and strengthened by the Holy Spirit[14](#) and God taught him Wisdom and the Torah and the Gospel.[15](#) Although Jesus is respected in Islam as one of the five greatest prophets, the idea of his divinity or his filial relationship with God is strongly denied. Likewise, the Qur'an states that Jesus was not crucified; rather, he was taken into heaven and a look-alike was crucified in his stead. The doctrine of the Trinity is also strongly rejected.

Therefore, we see that the Qur'anic view of Jesus has two aspects. On the one hand, it gives, as Parrinder puts it, "a greater number of honourable titles to Jesus than to any other figure of the past."[16](#) On the other hand, in various ways, the Qur'an speaks against both Jesus' divinity and the Trinitarian concept of God which are at the heart of Christian theology. However, the point which should not be dismissed is that there is no kind of disagreement between the Qur'an and real Christianity as far as the Qur'an is concerned, since real Christianity, as it was revealed to Jesus, is different from what Christians later introduced as Christianity.

According to the Qur'an, Jesus never admits his divinity or his filial relationship or any doctrine which violates God's unique and absolute transcendence. These doctrines were added to Christianity after Jesus' ascension into heaven. The Qur'an also speaks of a number of miracles of Jesus, two of which are not mentioned in the Bible. The first, as indicated before, is his speaking in the cradle while the second is his creating live birds from clay.

The question might arise here as to whether the Qur'an has any dispute with the followers of other religions, such as Judaism?

As a matter of fact, it has been a general rule in the history of theistic religions that any new prophet faces two kinds of resistance – from unbelievers and from followers of the previous prophet or prophets. For example, Jesus faced resistance from both pagans and Jews.[17](#) The Qur'an speaks of the challenges that Jesus had to face at the hands of the Jews. Jesus tried his best to convince the Jews to confess to his prophetic mission partly by appealing to his miracles, like raising the dead, but even this was not effective in bringing all the Jews towards his path. This kind of rejection is not due to any deficiency in the miracle but rather to an illness in the hearts that prevents them from admitting the truth set forth by a prophet. The Qur'an says:

وَجَحَدُوا بِهَا وَأَسْتَيْقَنُتْهَا أَنفُسُهُمْ ظُلْمًا وَعُلُوًّا فَانظُرْ كَيْفَ كَانَ عَاقِبَةُ الْمُفْسِدِينَ

"And they denied them, though their souls acknowledged them, wrongfully and out of pride. Behold, how was the end of the workers of corruption" (27: 14).

The same situation holds true concerning Prophet Muhammad (S). As Jesus ('a) was denied by some

Jews, Muhammad's mission was also rejected by some Christians and Jews. Therefore, depending on the case, the Qur'an argues against Jews, Christians, and all those who deny the authenticity of the Qur'an as a revealed book and Muhammad (S) as a genuine prophet.

However, this is not to say that all the disputes in the Qur'an with pagans or with followers of other religions are about the truth of the claims offered by the prophets. The Qur'an also delves into other issues wherein the dispute is not explicitly resolved. Instead, even without offering a judgement on the disputed matter and identifying which side is correct, the Qur'an occasionally simply terminates the discussion by saying that God knows better what the truth is. For instance, regarding the dispute over the number of the People of the Cave, God says:

سَيَقُولُونَ ثَلَاثَةَ رَّابِعُهُمْ كُلُّهُمْ وَيَقُولُونَ خَمْسَةَ سَادِسُهُمْ كُلُّهُمْ رَجْمًا بِالْغَيْبِ وَيَقُولُونَ سَبْعَةَ وَثَامِنُهُمْ كُلُّهُمْ قُلْ رَبِّيْ
أَعْلَمُ بِعِتَّهُمْ مَا يَعْلَمُهُمْ إِلَّا قَلِيلٌ فَلَا تُمَارِ فِيهِمْ إِلَّا مِرَأَةٌ ظَهِيرًا وَلَا تَسْتَفْتِ فِيهِمْ مِنْهُمْ أَحَدًا

"They will say, 'Three; and their dog was the fourth of them.' They will say, 'Five; and their dog was the sixth of them,' guessing at the Unseen. They will say, 'seven; and their dog was the eighth of them.' Say: 'My Lord knows very well their number, and none knows them, except a few.' So do not dispute with them, except in outward disputation, and ask not any of them for a pronouncement on them" (18:22).

But there are some issues, relating to the followers of other religions, on which God takes a clear position. Anyone with even a small familiarity with the Qur'an knows that the Qur'anic God strongly rejects anything not compatible with His unique and absolute transcendence.¹⁸ These are the same issues which lie at the heart of the disputes between the Qur'an and Christians and not, as mentioned before, between Islam and real Christianity.

It is interesting to explore the method and ways in which the Qur'an engages with Christians who have touched the most crucial issues by challenging God's unique transcendence. Some of the pertinent questions include: Was it responded to in one way or multiple ways? Was the response amiable or threatening? Was it done through argumentation or not? Does it talk about the origins of these wrong beliefs? We will try to answer these kinds of question by reviewing some of the Qur'anic verses on the issue. It shall be shown that God has used many possible ways and means to convince a given Christian that what he believes about Christ's Divinity or filial relationship or the Trinity does not have to do with authentic Christianity as revealed to Jesus himself.

The point which should be remembered here is that the Qur'an, for a number of reasons which are mentioned in the Book but cannot be discussed here, is more compassionate towards Christians than towards Jews, a fact which can be testified by this verse:

لَتَجِدَنَّ أَشَدَّ النَّاسِ عَدُوًّا لِّلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا إِلَيْهُودٌ وَالَّذِينَ أَشْرَكُوا وَلَنَجِدَنَّ أَفْرَيْهُمْ مُؤَدَّةً لِّلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا الَّذِينَ قَاتَلُوا إِنَّا

نَصَرَىٰ ذَلِكَ بِأَنَّ مِنْهُمْ قَسِيسِينَ وَرُهْبَانًا وَأَنَّهُمْ لَا يَسْتَكْبِرُونَ

“Thou wilt surely find the most hostile of men to the believers are the Jews and the idolaters; and thou wilt surely find the nearest of them in love to the believers are those who say ‘We are Christians’” (5:82).

God's usage of the various methods to reform the viewpoint of the Christians, which will be examined shortly, is another manifestation of His special grace towards Christians in comparison to Jews. When the Qur'an refers to the challenges raised by some Jews against God's transcendence, its language is very harsh:

وَقَاتَلَتِ الْيَهُودُ يَدُ اللَّهِ مَغْلُولَةً غُلَتْ أَيْدِيهِمْ وَلُعْنُوا ۝ بِمَا قَالُوا ۝ بَلْ يَدَاهُ مَبْسُوطَانِ يُنْفِقُ كَيْفَ يَشَاءُ وَلَيَزِيدَنَّ كَثِيرًا مِنْهُمْ مَا أُنْزِلَ إِلَيْكَ مِنْ رَبِّكَ طُغِيَّاً وَكُفَّارًا وَأَلْقَيْنَا بَيْنَهُمُ الْعَدُوَّةَ وَالْبَغْضَاءَ إِلَى يَوْمِ الْقِيَمَةِ كُلُّمَا أَوْقَدُوا ۝ نَارًا لِلْحَرْبِ أَطْفَأَهَا اللَّهُ وَيَسِّعُونَ فِي الْأَرْضِ فَسَادًا وَاللَّهُ لَا يُحِبُّ الْمُفْسِدِينَ

“The Jews have said, ‘God's hand is fettered’; Fettered are their hands, and they are cursed for what they have said. Nay, but His hands are outspread; He expends how He wills. And what has been sent down to thee from thy Lord will surely increase many of them in insolence and unbelief; and We have cast between them enmity and hatred, till the day of Resurrection” (5:64).

In contrast, the Qur'an engages in a variety of ways with the challenges that Christians put to God's transcendence. These will be dealt with here. What follows is a suggested categorization of God's response in dealing with the beliefs of the Christians which, according to the Qur'anic view, are at odds with real Christian beliefs.

Categorizations Of Verses On Jesus

First Group: Removing the Causes of Misunderstanding

At one stage, the Qur'an tries to remove the cause of misunderstandings about Jesus' real role and nature. What caused the Christians to elevate Jesus to the level of divinity or of a filial relationship to God? It goes without saying that the Qur'an sees no real basis for such beliefs and if, in general, Christians, and likewise Jews, believe in unwarranted beliefs it is because they have accepted what they have heard from their monks or rabbis:

أَتَخَذُوا ۝ أَحْبَارَهُمْ وَرُهْبَنَهُمْ أَرْبَابًا مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ وَالْمَسِيحَ أَبْنَ مَرْيَمَ وَمَا أُمِرُوا ۝ إِلَّا لِيَعْبُدُوا ۝ إِلَهًا وَحِدَّا لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ سُبْحَانَهُ ۝ عَمَّا يُشْرِكُونَ

“They have taken their rabbis and their monks as Lords apart from God ...” (9:31).

As Thomas Michael says, there was no mention of the Trinity among Christians before the year 180.¹⁹ Since there is no real basis in the Qur’anic view behind such Trinitarian claims, what may have led Christians to such beliefs?

One confirmative point for considering Jesus as the son of God might be his birth without a human father. But this great honour of being born in such a miraculous way should not be taken as sufficient evidence that he should be considered the son of God because, as the Qur'an puts it:

إِنَّ مَثَلَ عِيسَىٰ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ كَمَثَلَ إَادَمَ خَلَقَهُ مِنْ تُرَابٍ ثُمَّ قَالَ لَهُ كُنْ فَيَكُونُ

“Truly the likeness of Jesus, in God’s sight, is as Adam’s Likeness; He created him of dust, then He said unto him, ‘Be’, and he was (3:59).

The verse implies that if anyone is to be considered the son of God, it is Adam who has priority in this regard, having been created with neither a human father nor mother.

One other reason for lay people to elevate Christ to the level of divinity could be his exceptional miracles. Miracles like ‘raising the dead’ might mean for some that Jesus was God or at least a God-man. In order to counter this misunderstanding, the Qur'an adds the adverbial phrase “by My leave” after mentioning many miracles of Jesus. It is worth paying attention that even in the case where a verse contains a number of Jesus’ miracles, God does not suffice Himself to mention the phrase “by My leave” once at the end of the verse. Rather, the phrase is repeated after each miracle:

إِذْ قَالَ اللَّهُ يَعِيسَى أَيْنَ مَرِيمَ أَذْكُرْ نَعْمَنِي عَلَيْكَ وَعَلَىٰ وَلِدَتِكَ إِذْ أَيَّدْتُكَ بِرُوحِ الْقُدْسِ تُكَلِّمُ النَّاسَ فِي الْمَهْدِ وَكَهْلًا وَإِذْ عَلَمْتُكَ الْكِتَابَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ وَالْتَّوْرِيَةَ وَالْإِنْجِيلَ وَإِذْ تَخْلُقُ مِنَ الْطِينِ كَهْيَةً الطَّيْرَ بِإِنْدِنِي فَتَنْفُخُ فِيهَا فَتَكُونُ طَيْرًا بِإِنْدِنِي وَبَثَرِيُّ الْأَكْمَةَ وَالْأَبْرَصَ بِإِنْدِنِي وَإِذْ تُخْرُجُ الْمَوْتَى بِإِنْدِنِي وَإِذْ كَفَّتُ بَنِي إِسْرَاعِيلَ عَنَكَ إِذْ جَتَّهُمْ بِالْبَيْنَتِ فَقَالَ أَنَّدِنِي كَفَرُوا بِهِمْ إِنْ هَذَا إِلَّا سِحْرٌ مُّبِينٌ

“When God said, ‘Jesus son of Mary, remember My blessing upon thee and upon thy mother, when I confirmed thee with the Holy Spirit, to speak to men in the cradle, and of age, and when I taught you the Book, the Wisdom, the Torah, the Gospel; and when thou createst out of clay, by My leave, as the Likeness of a bird, and thou breathest into it, and it is a bird, by My leave; and thou healest the blind and the leper by My leave, and thou bringest the dead forth, by My leave; and when I restrained from thee the Children of Israel when thou camest unto them with the clear signs, and the unbelievers among them said, ‘This is nothing but sorcery manifest” (5: 110).

Since there does not seem to be any real probability of such a misunderstanding in the interpretation of the miracles of other prophets, the Qur'an does not add the phrase "by My leave" when speaking of their miracles. For example, regarding a miracle of Moses, the Qur'an says:

فَأَلْقَى عَصَاهُ فَإِذَا هِيَ تُبْعَانُ مُبِينٌ

“So he cast his staff, and behold, it was a serpent manifest. And he drew forth his hand and lo, it was white to the beholders” (26:32).

Second Group: A Call for Reflection and Awakening

As evident from the last discussion, the Qur'an does not claim that the arguments brought by the Christians to propose his divinity or filial relationship with God are untrue; rather, it points to the fact that they have no proof for what they claim. Therefore, the Qur'an does not see the doctrine of the absolute transcendence of God to be at all endangered by the Christian argument. As such, the task then is to make the Christians rethink what they believe. This is where the second group of Qur'anic verses can be introduced where God tries to awaken the conscience of Christians in order to inform them about reality in relation to what they falsely believe about Jesus ('a).

This process of awakening manifests itself in a variety of ways including the frequent suffixing of the name of the mother of Jesus ('a) after his own name. The only woman of whom the Qur'an speaks by name is Mary ('a) whose name also forms the title of the nineteenth chapter of the Qur'an. All other females are referred to by the name of their father or brother or husband. This reference to Mary in relation to the name of Jesus is not in imitation of those few examples in Arabic literature in which a person is introduced by his mother's name. Rather, this frequent reference to Jesus as “son of Mary” is to remind particularly Christians of Jesus' human nature. In fact, at times the Qur'an mentions Jesus with his mother's name even when his name is listed among the names of other prophets for whom there is no mention of their parents' names:

وَإِذْ أَخَذْنَا مِنَ النَّبِيِّنَ مِنْهُمْ وَمِنْكَ وَمِنْ نُوحٍ وَإِبْرَاهِيمَ وَمُوسَى وَعِيسَى أُبْنِ مَرِيمٍ وَأَخَذْنَا مِنْهُمْ مِنْهُمْ مِنْهُمْ غَلِيلًا

“And when We took a pact from the prophets, and from thee, and from Noah, and Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, son of Mary; We took from them a solemn compact” (33:7).

The Qur'an, in this process of awakening, also encourages Christians to reflect on a simple fact in the hope that they will refrain from believing in what is quite wrong from the Qur'anic perspective. On this account, God, referring to Jesus and Mary, says:

كَانَا يُأْكُلُونَ الطَّعَامَ

“... They both were eating food ...” (5:75).

In other words, God invites Christians themselves to judge how a person who is dependent on food can

be a God. To put it in modern language, a “God in need” is paradoxical even if Christians claim that Christ’s divinity belongs to another level of his life. In the Qur’anic view, God is absolutely needless (at all levels):

يَأَيُّهَا النَّاسُ أَنْتُمُ الْفُقَرَاءُ إِلَى اللَّهِ وَاللَّهُ هُوَ الْغَنِيُّ الْحَمِيدُ

“O men, you are the ones that have need of God; he is the All- sufficient, the All-laudable”
(35: 15).

At the same time, the Qur’an continues the process of awakening by stating that the issue of Jesus is clear enough and hence God is “surprised” so to speak that despite this clarity, they insist on their exaggerated claims.

مَا الْمَسِيحُ ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ إِلَّا رَسُولٌ قَدْ خَلَقْتُ مِنْ قَبْلِهِ الرُّسُلُ وَأُمُّهُ؟ صِدِيقَةُ كَانَتِي يَا كُلَّانِ الْطَّعَامِ ۝ أَنْظُرْ كَيْفَ تُبَيِّنُ لَهُمْ أَلَّا يَأْتِيَتِنِي أَنْظُرْ أَنِّي يُؤْفَكُونَ

“The Messiah, son of Mary, was only a Messenger; Messengers before him passed away; his mother was a just woman; they both ate food. Behold, how We make clear the signs to them; then behold, how they go astray” (5:75).

In general, the Qur’an frequently invites and encourages all who receive its message to think deeply about what the Qur’an says. The expressions like “haply they will reflect” can be found in about fifty places in the Qur’an. This emphasis shows that the Qur’an sees its claim as being in full compatibility with human understanding. On this account, the Qur’an sometimes addresses the very common sense of its audience to see if its claim is true.

This process is occasionally performed by asking a rhetorical question, the answer to which is so evident to a sound soul that the Qur’an does not mention the answer. For example, in the fifth chapter, the Qur’an refers Christians to their common sense by asking a question from the people who believe that God is the Messiah, Mary’s son:

قُلْ فَمَنْ يَمْلِكُ مِنَ اللَّهِ شَيْئاً إِنْ أَرَادَ أَنْ يُهْلِكَ الْمَسِيحَ ابْنَ مَرْيَمَ وَأُمَّهَ؟ وَمَنْ فِي الْأَرْضِ جَمِيعاً

“Who then shall overrule God in any way if He desires to destroy the Messiah, Mary’s son, and his mother, and all those who are on earth?” (5: 17).

Common sense is the best judge in answering this question.

Third Group: Gentle Advice

In the third group of verses, like a kind parent giving advice to his children, God compassionately calls on Christians not to exaggerate the tenets of their faith and not to believe in the Trinity:

يَأَهْلَ الْكِتَبِ لَا تَعْلُوَا ۝ فِي دِينِكُمْ وَلَا تَقُولُوا ۝ عَلَى اللَّهِ إِلَّا الْحَقُّ إِنَّمَا الْمَسِيحُ عِيسَى ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ وَكَلِمَتُهُ ۝
أَنْفَهَا إِلَى مَرْيَمَ وَرُوحٌ مِّنْهُ فَأَمِنُوا ۝ بِاللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ ۝ وَلَا تَقُولُوا ۝ ثَلَاثَةٌ أَنْتُهُمْ ۝ خَيْرًا لَّكُمْ إِنَّمَا اللَّهُ إِلَهٌ وَحْدَهُ

“O People of the book! Go not beyond the bounds in your religion, and say not as to God but the truth. The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only the messenger of God, and His Word that He committed to Mary, and a spirit from Him. So, believe in God and His Messenger and say not ‘Three’. Refrain; better it for you. God is only one God” (4: 171).

Fourth Group: Relating the Words of Jesus

Another Qur’anic response to Christians is to elaborate on Jesus’ own view on the issue. Perhaps such a method may be more acceptable to Christians who already hold Jesus (‘a) in high esteem. In the fifth chapter of the Qur’an, a conversation between God and Jesus is related as such:

وَإِذْ قَالَ اللَّهُ يَعِيسَى ابْنَ مَرْيَمَ إِنَّكَ قُلْتَ لِلنَّاسِ أَتَتَخْذُنِي وَأَنِّي إِلَهٌ مِّنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ قَالَ سُبْحَانَكَ مَا يَكُونُ لِي أَنْ أَقُولَ
مَا لَيْسَ لِي بِحَقٍّ إِنْ كُنْتُ قُلْتُهُ ۝ فَقَدْ عَلِمْتَهُ ۝ تَعْلَمُ مَا فِي نَفْسِي وَلَا أَعْلَمُ مَا فِي نَفْسِكِ إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ عَلَمُ الْغُيُوبِ

“And when God said, ‘O Jesus son of Mary, didst thou say unto men, “Take me and my mother as gods apart from God”?’ He said, ‘To Thee be glory! It is not mine to say what I have no right to. If I indeed said it, Thou knowest it, Knowing what is within my soul, and I know not what is within Thy soul; Thou knowest the things unseen” (5: 116).

مَا قُلْتُ لَهُمْ إِلَّا مَا أَمْرَتَنِي بِهِ ۝ أَنْ أَعْبُدُوا ۝ اللَّهُ رَبِّي وَرَبُّكُمْ

“I only said to them what Thou didst command me: ‘Serve God my Lord and your Lord” (5: 117).

Likewise, in another verse, God says about Jesus:

لَنْ يَسْتَنِكَ الْمَسِيحُ أَنْ يَكُونَ عَبْدًا لِّلَّهِ وَلَا الْمَلَائِكَةُ الْمُقْرَبُونَ

“The Messiah will not disdain to be a servant of God, neither the angels who are near stationed to Him ...” (4: 172).

Fifth Group: The True Implication of Certain Beliefs

In another group of verses, the Qur'an deals with the issue in a more serious way. The Qur'an warns Christians that a belief in the divinity of Jesus may seem harmless on the surface. However, it carries with it serious implications – i.e., 'disbelief in God':

لَقَدْ كَفَرَ الَّذِينَ قَالُوا إِنَّ اللَّهَ هُوَ الْمَسِيحُ ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ

"Certainly, they disbelieved who say: God, is the Messiah, Mary's son" (5:72).

The verse 5:17 also reinstates this corollary relationship between belief in Jesus' divinity and disbelief in God. In fact, the term 'disbelief' has created the highest degree of trouble for some Christian scholars who have tried to give a Christian interpretation of the Qur'an.[20](#)

Another verse which is severely critical of Christian beliefs has to do with Jesus' filial relationship with God:

وَقَالُوا إِنَّهُ أَتَخَذَ الْرَّحْمَنَ وَلَدًا

"And they say, 'The All-merciful has taken unto Himself a son'" (19:88).

لَقَدْ جِئْتُمْ شَيْئًا إِذًا

"You have indeed advanced something hideous!" (19:89).

تَكَادُ السَّمَاوَاتُ يَنْفَطِرُنَ مِنْهُ وَتَنْشَقُ الْأَرْضُ وَتَخِرُّ الْجِبَالُ هَذَا

"The heavens are well-nigh rent of it and the earth split asunder, and the mountains well-nigh fall down crashing" (19:90).

أَنْ دَعَوْا لِلرَّحْمَنَ وَلَدًا

"For that they have attributed to the All-merciful a son" (19:91).

وَمَا يَنْبَغِي لِلرَّحْمَنِ أَنْ يَتَخَذَ وَلَدًا

“And it behooves not the All-merciful to take a son” (19:92).[21](#)

We see, therefore, that the Qur'an makes use of many different methods to dissuade Christians from holding onto their exaggerated beliefs about Jesus. These include:

- (1) removing the causes of misunderstanding;
- (2) helping them reflect over the natural human life that Jesus lived;
- (3) giving them compassionate advice;
- (4) revealing Jesus' own views about the issue; and
- (5) making them realize the necessary consequences of their exaggerated beliefs.

It is not unexpected that God, who introduces himself as the most compassionate, should try all possible ways to encourage Christians to refrain from believing in the Trinity or in the Divinity of Jesus or in his filial relationship with God. In this sense, God's approach in relation to Christians is quite different from his approach in relation to pagans and infidels. This is because Christians believe in the metaphysical and supernatural world; in so far as they also believe in something contrary to what all the prophets, including Jesus, were taught by God throughout history, it is perhaps out of good intention. That is to say, it is because they think the Trinity, Jesus' divinity and Jesus' filial relationship are the only true faith that they reject pure monotheism.

Sources Of Complexity

Due to the clarity of the Qur'anic stance which has been alluded to above, the status of Christ has not been a controversial issue in Islamic thought – neither in the Sunni tradition nor the Shia one.[22](#) Any complexities which do surface usually come from either of two sources: modernized Muslim scholars and Christian perspectives on the issue.

We know that misunderstandings between Christians and Muslims manifests themselves, as Mahmoud Ayoub puts it, in movements such as the Crusades, colonization, Evangelization, and Orientalism.[23](#) Some Muslim intellectuals are trying to remove these misunderstandings as much as they can. This is an invaluable endeavour but only in so far as it implies the absence of unwarranted interpretations of the Qur'an. Unfortunately, however, for some modernized Muslims, dialogue means not merely working on common grounds but also seeking to satisfy the other party even through ideas which may not be compatible with Qur'anic teachings. The Qur'anic guideline directing Muslims as to how they should act in the encounter with Christians and Jews is sometimes dismissed by these modernized Muslim scholars. If one's intention is just to satisfy Christians and Jews without expressing and seeking the truth, the inevitable failure of this effort is pointed out by the Qur'an:

وَلَن تُرْضَى عَنْكَ الْيَهُودُ وَلَا الْنَّصَارَى حَتَّى تَتَّبَعَ مِلَّتَهُمْ

“Never will the Jews be satisfied with thee, neither the Christians, not till thou followest their religion ...” (2: 120).

To understand the second source of complexity, that which comes from Christian scholars, we have to look briefly at some Christian approaches to Jesus in the Qur'an. The main two approaches are polemical and assimilative. According to Neal Robinson, the following are some principal strands to the polemical response: First, the argument that the Qur'anic teachings on Jesus are distorted; for example, Jesus did not foretell the coming of Muhammad as the Qur'an claims. Second, the argument that there are some “errors” in the Qur'an – for example, the oddity of Mary's being introduced as the sister of Aaron may suggest that the Qur'an has confused Mary with Miriam, the sister of Aaron. Third, the argument that Muhammad derived his information, not from orthodox Christians, but from heretical Christian informers.²⁴ There are various Islamic responses to these points, and Neal Robinson himself has noted some of these.²⁵ For example, regarding the alleged confusion between Mary and Miriam, he points out that the Prophet himself had responded to this objection.

Muslims, in general, do not pay attention to the objections set forth by polemicists regarding the authenticity of the Qur'an. This is not merely because Islamic scholars have already provided appropriate answers for the objections but also because the Qur'an itself (predicting what would be said against the Qur'an or the Prophet) provided Muslims with an answer:

وَلَقَدْ نَعْلَمُ أَنَّهُمْ يَقُولُونَ إِنَّمَا يُعَلَّمُهُ بَشَرٌ ۝ لِسَانُ الَّذِي يُلْحِدُونَ إِلَيْهِ أَعْجَمٌ ۝ وَهَذَا لِسَانٌ عَرَبِيٌّ مُّبِينٌ

“And We know very well that they say, ‘only a mortal is teaching him.’ The speech of him at whom they hint is barbarous; and this is speech Arabic, manifest” (16: 103).²⁶

Both Christian polemicists and assimilationists believe that the Qur'anic Jesus is more Christian than what Muslims claim. For example, it has been argued by John of Damascus, the polemicist, that since the Qur'an refers to Jesus as ‘word’ or ‘spirit’ and since God is inseparable from His Word and His Spirit, Jesus must be divine. In light of what was related from the Qur'an, such a claim is not worthy of attention, for we saw that the Qur'an rejects the divinity of Jesus in the same verse that he admires him as the Word and Spirit of God (See 4:171).²⁷

This problem is more clearly manifest in the second, assimilative method. Christian scholars like Charles Ledit and R. C. Zachner have taken two approaches:

- (1) they strongly stress the commonalities between the Qur'anic and Christian understandings of Jesus, and

(2) they offer a Christian interpretation of the verses in the Qur'an which are not compatible with the general Christian belief.

While the first part is to be welcomed and admired, the second part is questionable. Sometimes Christian interpretations of Qur'anic verses have faced objections from Christians themselves. Furthermore, Christian scholars like Neal Robinson make the objection to Ledit that in some of his interpretation he glosses over crucial points which the Qur'an explicitly emphasizes.²⁸ At any rate, this tendency to bring closer the ideas from the Qur'an and Christianity which are in sharp disagreement has played a prominent role in adding unnecessary complexity to the issue of Jesus in the Qur'an.

Final Remarks

A few concluding remarks are worth mentioning here: First, it has been frequently claimed that the Qur'anic verses on Jesus were directed to Christians living in the Arabian Peninsula at the time of the Prophet of Islam and, therefore, has nothing to do with Western Christians. This claim has been supported by the fact that the Qur'an criticizes Christians for considering both Jesus and his mother as their lords²⁹ while no Western Christian believes in the divinity of Mary.

It should be clarified that the Qur'an does not claim that all Christians had, have, and will have the same beliefs all over the world and for all time. Regardless of whom it is directly addressed to in the context of its original revelation, the Qur'an strongly rejects anything opposing the unique transcendence of God. Therefore, each Christian can reach the Qur'anic view towards his beliefs easily. To put it differently, as far as Christian doctrines are concerned, the Qur'anic view is clear enough and it does not matter which group of Christians is addressed in these verses. However, as far as particular Christians are concerned, it can be said that some of the Qur'anic verses may only be applicable to Christians who were living at that particular time or in that particular context.

Second, we have frequently referred to the clarity of the Qur'anic verses, including those verses concerning Jesus. We are not trying to say that any further discussion of the Qur'an, or of the Qur'anic verses on Jesus in particular, is necessarily pointless. On the contrary, as was indicated earlier, the Qur'an has repeatedly encouraged people to reflect on all its verses so as to reach a better understanding of the Qur'anic teachings. However, the Qur'an lays emphasis on internal consistency between its verses which is a sign that the Qur'an is a real revelation. Where some modern Muslim scholars are not careful is that they try to interpret a verse independent of other verses which might shed light on its real meaning, thus ignoring the criterion of internal compatibility within the Qur'an. This is the main criticism that one can direct against the opinions of some modern Muslims. These scholars should not forget the guideline from the Qur'an in which God rebukes those who say:

نُؤْمِنُ بِعَضٍ وَنَكْفُرُ بِعَضٍ وَيُرِيدُونَ أَنْ يَتَخِذُوا إِنَّ ذَلِكَ سَيِّئًا

“... ‘We believe in part; and disbelieve in part’, desiring to take between this and that a way”
(4: 150).

Finally, it seems that the topic of “Jesus in the Qur'an” is one of the best bases for dialogue between Muslims and Christians. One of the most helpful steps in such a dialogue would be for Christians to clarify their position on the authenticity of the Qur'an and the role of the Prophet Muhammad (S). For example, with respect to Catholicism as the main denomination in Christianity, there is still some ambiguity in their position. As Professor Ovey Mohammed puts it: “The Catholic Church settled the question of the legitimacy of Islam after Christianity but provided no explicit answer to two questions: Was Muhammad a prophet? And is the Qur'an the word of God?”³⁰

Due to one of the more positive aspects of modern thought, the channels of communication between different faiths seem more open; however, one of the negative aspects of modernity that is becoming more prominent in academia is the dismissal of an objective accessible truth. This last point, in one way or another, has changed the aim of many of the dialogues in our time which, in my contention, deprives them of the possibility of one of their most fruitful outcomes.

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1. In this paper, I have used Arthur J. Arberry's translation of the Qur'an. However, where warranted, I have made minor changes to his translation.

2. I use the phrase 'the Gospel' in a Qur'anic sense here and throughout the text. Christians would talk of the Gospels, since there are four of them in the Bible. When they say 'the Gospel', it is used in a broader sense of the Good News about Jesus, and is not restricted to the actual books of the Gospels. For example, St. Paul talks about his preaching as 'preaching the Gospel.'

3. In recent decades, we have seen the appearance of new approaches, sometimes in contradiction with each other, in the arena of Christian theology. This divergence has no parallel in Islamic thought. The main reason for this is the Qur'anic guidelines which have played a prominent role in this regard.

4. "Do they not contemplate the Qur'an? Had it been from [someone] other than Allah, they would have surely found much discrepancy in it." (4:32).

Note: translations appearing in the footnotes have been taken from Ali Quli Qarai's translation of the Qur'an. [Ed.]

5. "When they come to you, to dispute with you, the faithless say, 'These are nothing but myths of the ancients.'" (6:25). This is one of the guidelines which we referred to previously. Quite aside of what some modernized so-called scholars have done in recent decades, this guideline prevents Muslim scholars from offering a natural interpretation of sonic phenomena, such as the miracles of the prophets, including Jesus.

6. "We certainly know that they say, 'It is only a human that instructs him.' The language of him to whom they refer is non-Arabic, while this is a clear Arabic language" (16: 103).

7. "It is He who has sent down to you the Book. Parts of it are definitive verses, which are the mother of the Book, while others are metaphorical. As for those in whose hearts is deviance, they pursue what is metaphorical in it, courting temptation and courting its interpretation. But no one knows its interpretation except Allah and those firmly grounded in knowledge; they say, 'We believe in it; all of it is from our Lord.' And none takes admonition except those who possess intellect" (3:7).

8. "Today I have perfected your religion for you, and I have completed My blessing upon you, and I have approved Islam as your religion" (5:3).

9. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Islam in Modern History* (Princeton University Press, 1957), p. vi.

10. John Shelby Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die* (Haper, San Francisco, 1998), p. 12.

11. "She said, 'How shall I have a child seeing that no human being has ever touched me, nor have I been unchaste?'" (19:20).

"He said, 'So shall it be. Your Lord says, "It is simple for Me." And so that We may make him a sign for mankind and a

mercy from Us, and it is a matter [already] decided.” (19:21).

12. “Thereat she pointed to him. They said, ‘How can we speak to one who is yet a baby in the cradle?’” (19:29).

He said, ‘Indeed I am a servant of Allah! He has given me the Book and made me a prophet.’” (19:30).

13. “The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only an apostle of Allah, and His Word that He cast toward Mary and a spirit from Him.” (4:171).

14. “... and We gave Jesus, the son of Mary, manifest proofs, and confirmed him with the Holy Spirit.” (2:87).

15. “When Allah will say, O Jesus son of Mary, remember My blessing upon you and upon your mother, when I strengthened you with the Holy Spirit, so you would speak to the people in the cradle and in adulthood, and when I taught you the Book and wisdom, the Torah and the Evangel ...” (5:110).

16. Geoffrey Parrinder, Jesus in the Quran (Oneworld, Oxford, 1995), p. 16.

17. “And when there came to them a Book from Allah, confirming that which is with them – and earlier they would pray for victory over the pagans – so when there came to them what they recognized, they defied it ...” (2:89).

18. It should be noted that the Qur'an's emphasis on the absolute transcendence of God by no means denies his immanence, as many Christians imagine. For a correct understanding of the issue of immanence and transcendence in Islam, consult Ovey Mohammed's Muslim-Christian Relations, p. 8–10. As an example of an incorrect perception of the issue, one can mention Hegel's misunderstanding in his fourth lecture on the philosophy of religion under the title of “Christianity: The Consummate Religion” published in G.W.F. Hegel, ed. by Peter C. Hodgson (Fortress Press, 1997), p. 257.

19. Thomas Michael's book on Christian theology was produced for Muslims and translated into Persian from the Arabic. The English version has not yet been published. The above point is from the Persian translation, Kalam-e Mashihi, p. 73.

20. C.f. Parrinder, p.31.

21. For a Christian interpretation of the verse consult R. C. Zaehner At Sundry Times in which he claims that this verse “is consonant with orthodox Christian teaching” (p.202). We will talk more in the paper about these kinds of positions.

22. There is a large Arabic book by the title of 'Isa wa Maryam fi al-Qur'an wa al-tafasir (Jesus and Mary in the Qur'an and its Commentaries) (Dar Shuruq, 1996) in which twenty-one Sunni and Shiite commentaries on related verses are brought together. One can see that all of them agree upon the central points which the Qur'an says about Jesus and Mary.

23. Mahmoud Ayoub, “Roots of Muslim-Christian Conflict” in Muslim World, 79(1989), p. 24–45.

24. Neal Robinson, Christ in Islam and Christianity (State University of New York Press, 1991), p. 8.

25. Neal Robinson, “Christian and Muslim Perspectives on Jesus in the Quran” in Fundamentalism and Tolerance, Eds. Andrew Linzey and Peter Wexler (Bellew Pub- lishing, 1991).

26. The intention is not to show the real prophethood of Muhammad (S) by a verse from his book, the Qur'an. What we are trying to say here is that the Qur'an has prepared Muslims for these kinds of criticisms as well as for their appropriate answer. The fact that God revealed the Quran to the illiterate prophet is another argument from God to back Muslims against these kinds of objections.

27. Robinson, Christ in Islam and Christianity, p. 10.

28. Ibid., 11.

29. “And when Allah will say, ‘O Jesus son of Mary! Was it you who said to the people, “Take me and my mother for gods besides Allah”? He will say, ‘Immaculate are You! It does not behoove me to say what I have no right to [say]’” (5:116).

30. Mohammed, p.61.

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- [5] <https://al-islam.org/printpub/book/export/html/208615>
- [6] <https://al-islam.org/printmobi/book/export/html/208615>
- [7] <https://al-islam.org/tags/quran>
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