Introduction

This chapter surveys Christian attitudes towards the status of the Qurʾān, the strategies Christians have used to engage the Qurʾān and key themes in Christian approaches to the Qurʾān. Christians have expressed a range of attitudes in response to Muslim claims that the Qurʾān is God’s word, from outright rejection and nonengagement, to appropriation for argumentation, to acceptance of inspirational characteristics within it. Christians have appropriated Qurʾānic passages for a variety of usages, including apologetics, polemics, translation, theological reflection, evangelization and academic purposes. By tracing how Christians have viewed the Qurʾān in the historical past and contemporary practice, readers can better comprehend why Christians have such diverse approaches to the Qurʾān and appreciate the possibilities of reading another religion’s scripture in ways that can challenge traditional interpretation and/or discover common ground.

Historical factors and individual agency have shaped Christian approaches to the Qurʾān. Their attitudes have varied according to time and place, with no single outlook unique to any one time period. Middle Eastern Christians were the first communities to assess the Qurʾān. In the seventh century, Christians expressed little awareness of the Qurʾān as a text, much less as an Arabic scripture. In the Umayyad period (661–750), Christians largely dismissed the significance of the text as a haphazard human creation. By the ’Abbasid period (750–1258), Christian approaches to the Qurʾān reached greater maturity. They composed systematic critiques of its historical origins, its interpretation and its relationship to the Islamic community. Christians began in this stage to cite Qurʾānic verses for apologetic and polemical arguments that demonstrated the truth of Christianity. While refuting passages they suspected to be erroneous, they also quoted the Qurʾān as an authoritative source. In the later medieval period in the Middle East, Eastern Christians followed established patterns of apologetic use of the Qurʾān, while in the West the medieval period was an important age for refutation of the Qurʾān. By the Enlightenment period, the Qurʾān began to be treated as an example of statesmanship by western Christians. In the nineteenth century, Western empires gave rise to new evangelistic engagements with the Qurʾān, and by the twentieth century, conciliatory approaches and academic analyses became common. In the twenty-first century, contemporary Christian attitudes towards the Qurʾān are as diverse as ever.
David Bertaina

How have Christians viewed the status of the Qurʾān?

Throughout history, Christians have rarely expressed opinions regarding the status of the Qurʾān because their affirmation of Jesus Christ as the end of God’s revelation precludes the possibility that the Qurʾān could be treated as a divine scripture (Ford 1993: 160). However, in view of the fact that the Qurʾān comments on biblical stories and Christian doctrines, five general attitudes among Christians have emerged regarding its status.

The first of these is to treat the Qurʾān as foreign to Christian theology. This approach does not endorse any acknowledgement of the Qurʾān and in some cases considers it irrelevant to Christian life. There is little literature on this topic, as it assumes de facto that no engagement with the Qurʾān is advisable. For instance, Sam Schlorff has argued that making reference to the Qurʾān might mislead Muslim conversation partners into thinking that the text has authority for Christians (Schlorff 2006; Bridger 2015: 27–30). If Christians want Muslims to respect the Bible, then Christians must avoid making any judgments about the Qurʾān. Schlorff argues that Christian acknowledgement of the Qurʾān as a source of theological reflection would result in syncretism and confusion of religious language and principles. On the other hand, the Roman Catholic Church’s document on other religions, Nostra Aetate from the Second Vatican Council, maintains complete silence regarding the Qurʾān, without any comment about it at all. Instead, it calls upon Catholics to ‘forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding’ (Nostra Aetate 1965). Other Christians have advocated no interaction with the Qurʾān because it is completely unreliable. While the former positions are agnostic regarding the Qurʾān’s status, the latter asserts that it is not worthy of engagement. For instance, John of Damascus (d. 749) contended that the Qurʾān included only ‘tales worthy of laughter’ (Sahas 1972: 132–41).

A second attitude Christians express is to declare that the Qurʾānic text is valid insofar as it proves the authenticity of Christianity. This proof-text approach Christianizes the Qurʾān to make it acceptable. For writers such as Elias of Nisibis (d. 1046) and Paul of Antioch (active c. 1200) the Qurʾān could be used to support Christian teachings. Paul argued that proof-texting was a responsible interpretation despite Muslim claims that this implied Christians must accept all of its verses (Griffith 2014: 230). Other Christians acknowledged that certain verses indicated positive familiarity with Christian faith and practice, though the integrity of that original message had been altered by Muhammad. The Legend of Sergius Bahriā asserted that a monk trained Muhammad in the doctrines of Christianity to make it appropriate for evangelising Arabs, but the message was corrupted (Roggema 2009). John of Damascus also claimed a heretical monk named Sergius was responsible for inspiring some of Muhammad’s content (Sahas 1972). Others contended that while the Qurʾān contains truth, Muslims distorted its intended meaning. This tactic responded to Muslim claims that Christians had misinterpreted the Bible. For instance, Theodore Abū Qurra (d. c. 830) insisted that the Qurʾān’s affirmation of the Bible (Q 5:47) and its Christian practitioners (Q 5:82) was ignored by Muslims, who interpreted it unfaithfully (Nasry 2008: 240).

A third attitude for Christians is to view the Qurʾān as a deficient text and to criticise it polemically. The ninth-century Christian Arabic letter of ‘Abd al-Maṣḥīf al-Kindī argues the Qurʾān is not ‘clear Arabic speech’ since it contains a number of foreign words and mimics Arabic poetical styles (Newman 1993: 460–6), and that numerous additions, deletions and editorial changes confirm its human origins. Christian apologists such as Elias of Nisibis asserted that the arbitrary compilation of the Arabic text and the lack of clarity about certain passages demonstrated it was neither inimitable nor exceptional compared to other texts (Bertaina 2011). Al-Kindī and Būluṣ ibn Rajā’ (d. c. 1020) argued that the Muslim community corrupted the integrity of the Qurʾān. These accusations fell upon the Jewish convert Kaʿb al-Aḥbār, who allegedly inserted negative
portraits of Christians into the text, or on the third caliph 'Uthmān (d. 656) for destroying variant versions of the text in his canonisation process, or upon later editors such as Marwān ibn al-Ḥākam (d. 685) or Hajjāj ibn Yūsuf (d. 714). Other Christians argued that the deficiency regarding the text was its lack of concomitant signs and miracles that guaranteed it came from God. Patriarch Timothy I (d. 823) told the Caliph al-Mahdī: 'Since signs and miracles are proofs of the will of God, the conclusion drawn from their absence in your Book is well known to your Majesty’ (Mingana 1928: 172–3).

A fourth attitude prevalent among contemporary Christian thinkers is the supposition that the Qurʾān is partially true or even divinely inspired. They tend to emphasise similarity over difference in their assessments of the Qurʾān. Some believe that the Qurʾān can be reconciled with Christian faith and can be acknowledged as divine revelation or truth. Others believe that the Qurʾān can be viewed as truthful once a Christian hermeneutic is applied to its content. Underlying this dual position of affirmation and rejection is the tension between the Qurʾān contradicting Christian beliefs versus the impulse among Christians to be respectful and considerate towards Muslim beliefs regarding their scripture (Marshall 2014: 90). None, however, agree with Muslims that the Qurʾān can be considered God’s speech dictated to Muhammad.

William Montgomery Watt (d. 2006) considered the Qurʾān ‘the product of a divine initiative and therefore revelation’ which shared patterns with earlier prophetic texts of the Old Testament (Watt 1969: 8). Watt does not suggest that Christians should accept the Qurʾān as a normative text for their own lives, but he recommends that they should consider it as one of several paths to salvation that God has made available for human beings (Ford 1993: 148–9). This inclusivist approach is echoed in the writings of Louis Massignon (d. 1962) and his French Catholic school, including Youakim Moubarac (d. 1995) and Denise Mason (d. 1994), who felt that Christians could appreciate the Qurʾān as a sacred text, even when it does not have ultimate authority for Christians (Ford 1993: 150–2). The Muslim–Christian Research Group (Groupe de Recherche Islamo-Chrétien; GRIC) has advocated an exalted place for the Qurʾān as a word of God. Including academic theologians such as Robert Caspar (d. 2007; Caspar 1982), they ‘legitimately recognise the Qurʾān as a scripture that expresses a Word of God, not only for the Muslim, but also for the Christian and every human being’ (Muslim–Christian Research Group 1989: 68). While the group denies accusations of relativism, their following statements result in a paradox: the Qurʾān is a scripture; that same Qurʾān denies Jesus Christ’s divine incarnation and the proclamation of a Triune God; the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the Word of God, is for the salvation of the world. Their statements have led to public criticism as well (Marshall 2014: 90–2; Ford 1993: 159–61).

Giulio Basetti-Sani (d. 2001) proposed an alternative way to argue that the Qurʾān was in agreement with Christian truth. He agreed that it was an inspired book, but using historical criticism he argued that ‘it is not necessary to admit that Mohammed, and after him his followers, understood the complete sense of the Koran’s message’ (Basetti-Sani 1977: 104), because it affirms Christian truth when read in its Christian theological context. To achieve this harmony, Basetti-Sani’s Christian reading of the Qurʾān supersedes the Muslim interpretive tradition (Marshall 2014: 92; Ford 1993: 152–3). For instance, Basetti-Sani interprets the ‘Night of Glory’ in Q 97 to refer to Jesus Christ’s nativity (Basetti-Sani 1977: 156–8). The Anglican bishop Kenneth Cragg (d. 2012) believed the Qurʾān to be an event and a document that is a fusion of ‘personal charisma, literary fascination, corporate possession, and imperative religion’ (Cragg 1994: 13). He accepted the validity of the Qurʾān as a word from God that must be respected within its religious community (Ford 1993: 157–9). Yet Cragg also affirmed that Christians could reflect upon alternative interpretations when the Islamic tradition failed to highlight these themes from the sacred text (Whittingham 2012: 6). For Cragg, western secularists and Christians must understand the Qurʾān to address contemporary needs and to prevent religious violence. But Christians
must also ‘decide by the Gospel’ in this encounter concerning three matters in the Qurʾān: transcendence (‘Is divine sovereignty to be understood as to leave no room for human choice?’); law (‘Is prophethood and the bringing of law the ultimate solution to the problem of the human condition?’); and salvation (‘Are people fulfilled?’) (Whittingham 2012: 7–8). Cragg finds three problems in its passages: an overbearing fixation upon punishment, a lack of self-critical reflection (success is assumed) and a lack of intimate divine grace. Peter Ford and Mathias Zahniser have proposed that Christians think of the Qurʾān in the way that Protestant Christians think of the apocrypha (i.e. deuto-canonical books for Catholics). These are texts that may be read for spiritual benefit, although they do not have equal status to revealed scripture (Ford 1993: 162–3). Ford proposes this framework for pastoral reasons to aid Christians living in an Islamic culture, while Zahniser advocates Qurʾānic readings to seek out interpretations that harmonise with Christian scripture (Zahniser 2011).

The fifth attitude is expressed by Christian theologians who are motivated to respect the Qurʾān by charity. However, they also acknowledge that it is insincere to minimise or overlook the differences between Qurʾānic and Christian language regarding divine revelation and the Word of God. These thinkers emphasise ‘avoiding the polemics of the past, encouraging careful study, [being] respectful of Muslim devotional life and conscious of the centrality of the Qurʾān within this; but at the same time unwilling to regard the Qurʾān as a revealed scripture alongside the Bible’ (Marshall 2014: 95). For instance, the Patriarch Timothy noted in the eighth century that the Qurʾān’s message contained social and spiritual profit for the Arabs because it brought them out of paganism, but he did not consider it divinely inspired. Jacques Jomier (d. 2008) stressed that Christians should respect the Qurʾān as a sacred book and they should ‘share in those human values to which one can appeal to help mutual understanding’ (Jomier 2002: 99). While the Qurʾān makes reference to the Bible, Muslims do not read the Bible and developed an alternative interpretive tradition that contains similar themes. But these themes are facile in their similarity and are quite unlike Christian theological views (Marshall 2014: 94–5; Ford 1993: 145–6). Christian Troll has argued that dialogue is more fruitful when it recognises and accepts differences between the Qurʾānic and biblical understandings of scripture and not just the commonalities they share from the biblical tradition (Marshall 2014: 96). Christians cannot consider the Qurʾān a way to the Gospel or a word from God, but that does not prevent people from using it to establish some common ground for discussion (Troll 2009: 144). For Troll, the Qurʾān is a challenge to Christians because it has given rise to another religion that uses biblical material. But this has given Christians the opportunity to read and study the Qurʾān as ‘part of the large, theologically demanding task of discerning the fruits of the Spirit in the foundational texts and practices of the religions as well as in the actual lives of their adherents’ (Troll 2009: 141).

What types of strategies have Christians used to engage the Qurʾān?

Christians have analysed the Qurʾān for a number of reasons, including apologetics, polemics, translation, theological reflection and evangelisation, and for academic purposes. They make use of the Qurʾān by both allusion and direct citation. From an early point, Arabic-speaking Christians made allusions to the scripture because of its linguistic influence, which suffused their own theological vocabulary and added authority (Griffith 1999: 217). Thus, the anonymous eighth-century Christian Arabic work On the Triune nature of God notes: ‘We ask You, O God, by Your mercy and Your power, to make us among those who know Your truth, follow Your good pleasure, avoid Your wrath, extol Your most beautiful names, and speak using Your most sublime similitudes’ (Swanson 2014: 42–3). The contemporary al-Kalima school of thought has also interpreted biblical texts using Islamic linguistic terms (Bridger 2015: 105–28). Christians have also alluded to Qurʾānic
biblical stories and figures. Typically, authors make reference to a passage in the Qur’an that confirms the same event in the Bible, such as Jesus’ birth narratives in Q 3 and 19. Christians usually quote the Qur’an directly to proof text a passage for an argument or for the sake of historical context or critically situating a passage in its wider literary context. In the Islamic world, Christian Arabic proof texts added authenticity to their arguments (Swanson 1998).

The apologetic approach adopted by some Christians does not necessarily cast the Qur’an in a negative light, and some theologians even view it as a text with a certain access to truth and are willing to cite the Qur’an as an authority in their apologetics in order to demonstrate that Christian faith and practice agree with qur’anic interpretation. For instance, Arabic-speaking Christians have often described the Trinitiy in terms of God’s attributes of speech (the Word Jesus Christ) and life (the Holy Spirit) in their Trinitarian apologetic defences (Wilde 2014: 153–78). On the Triune Nature of God points out that the Qur’an also contains provisional wisdom about God’s Word and Spirit being one with Him: ‘What could be more clarifying and enlightening than this, when we find in the Torah, the Prophets, the Psalms, and the Gospel, and you [Muslims] find it in the Qur’an, that God and His Word and His Spirit are one god and one Lord?’ (Swanson 2014: 46). For apologists, the Qur’an affirms the Bible, and they have intertwined the two sources in a coherent divine message. Other noteworthy figures to use the Qur’an in an apologetic fashion include Patriarch Timothy (Mingana 1928), Theodore Abū Qurra, Nicetas of Byzantium, Abraham of Tiberias (Newman 1993: 269–353), Elias of Nisibis, George the Monk (twelfth century), Paul of Antioch (Griffith 2014), Nicholas of Cusa (d. 1464; Hopkins 1994), William Tisdall (d. 1928) and Samuel Zwemer (d. 1952). More recently, online forums have been popular for apologetic arguments regarding the Qur’an, such as the website ‘Answering Islam’ (www.answering-islam.org/Quran/index.html).

By contrast, Christian polemicists have claimed that the Qur’an is flawed because of its literary shortcomings, its haphazard assembly as an incoherent text, its plagiarised biblical content and its lack of authentication for itself or its prophet. They have claimed the Qur’an lacks an interpretive consensus among its followers, the means of its revelation is disputed, there are conflicting readings of the text, the current text omits certain passages found in alternative versions, it was canonised in an arbitrary fashion and it contains repetitious phrases and contradictions. Polemical authors have only cited the Qur’an to draw attention to its flaws and to refute claims to its divine inspiration. The most notable critics following this approach include John of Damascus (Sahas 1972), al-Kindī (Newman 1993: 411–545), the debate attributed to Theodore Abū Qurra (Nasry 2008), Būlus ibn Rājā’, Peter the Venerable (d. 1156), Ramon Martí (d. 1284), William of Tripoli (d. after 1273), Riccoldo da Montecroce (d. 1865; Whittingham 2012) and William Henry Temple Gairdner (d. 1928). Among the most well-known contemporary polemicists is Robert Spencer (Spencer 2009).

In order to understand the Qur’an properly and to refute its content, non-Arabic speaking Christians have translated the text into their local languages. Scholars agree that most translators attempted to be as accurate as possible in their renderings of the lexical and linguistic meanings of the Arabic. The earliest Latin translation, done by Robert of Ketton (d. late twelfth century), was a complex paraphrase whose primary motivation was to relate the text’s ideas faithfully along with critical commentary that was added over time (Burman 2007: 88–121). Mark of Toledo (d. after 1216) took a more literal approach in his translation (Burman 2007: 122–48), while John Gabriel Terrenlens’ bilingual Qur’an was mostly free of polemical arguments (Burman 2007: 149–77). In continental Europe, the Alcorani textus universus of Ludovico Marracci (d. 1700) was the most influential Early Modern edition, translation and commentary on the Qur’an in the age of published books, while George Sale’s (d. 1736) English translation became most prevalent in the English-speaking world. Later translations tended to adopt academic rather than Christian perspectives.
In contrast to apologetics and polemics, modern Christian theological investigations of the Qur’an seek to understand the text on its own terms. While they acknowledge it cannot have the same status as the Bible, they still regard it as fruitful for Christian theological exploration. Michael Lodahl has explored the divine visitation to Abraham and Sarah (Q 11:69–75) in light of Genesis 18 (Lodahl 2010). He has also looked at themes of creation in the Qur’an (e.g. Q 16 is patterned on Psalm 104) and the creation of Adam as the image of God with headship over creation (Q 2:30–4). John Kaltner has examined Joseph in Q 12 alongside Genesis 37–50 (Kaltner 2003). Brian Brown has explored prophetic motifs in the Qur’an’s presentation of biblical figures (Brown 2007). Several Christian theologians have examined the Qur’an for characteristics of religious liberty (e.g. readings of Q 2:256), human dignity and social justice issues (Troll 2009). The lives of Mary and Jesus are central to many Christian theological explorations of the Qur’an (Anderson 2016). Michel Cuypers has explored Jesus’ earthly ministry and the eucharist in Q 5 (Cuypers 2009). Theologians and historians continue to examine longstanding doctrinal issues, including the Trinity, the meaning of ‘Word of God’, Jesus’ incarnation, his crucifixion and the final judgment (Block 2014). Recently, academic theologians David Ford and Peter Ochs have encouraged ‘scriptural reasoning’ as a reading method for analysing the Qur’an in an interreligious setting (Ford 2006).

Christians continue to read the Qur’an for evangelization purposes. Some books explain the Qur’anic context in a Christian context (Ghattas and Ghattas 2009; White 2013). Mark Anderson analysed the qur’anic context in an academic way together with a deeper Christian theological reflection (Anderson 2016). J. Scott Bridger has assessed historical and contemporary uses of the Qur’an in Christian communities and argued for positive use of the Qur’an in mission settings as a way to draw its horizons into the biblical world view (Bridger 2015). Using satellite television, the Egyptian Coptic priest Zakaria Botros uses the Qur’an in his evangelising efforts in Islamic countries. One popular evangelization tool is the CAMEL approach, which advocates reading the Qur’an as a bridge to belief in the biblical Jesus Christ – CAMEL stands for ‘Chosen’ (‘Maryam was chosen by Allah for a special purpose’), ‘Announced by Angels’, ‘Miracles’ (‘Jesus’ power is revealed in his miracles’), and ‘Eternal Life’ (‘Jesus knows the way and is the way to heaven’) (Greeson 2010: 106). This movement encourages Muslims to remain in their Muslim culture while also accepting Jesus Christ as their saviour.

Academic approaches, while not necessarily from a Christian viewpoint, are nevertheless relevant as they influence the kinds of views that Christians adopt regarding the Qur’an. Gabriel Said Reynolds has drawn attention to the Qur’an’s relationship to late antique Christian biblical and postbiblical readings of salvation history (Reynolds 2010). Christoph Luxenberg has argued that qur’anic passages are the product of a hypothetical Syriac Christian proto-text (Luxenberg 2007). Sidney Griffith highlights the link between Syriac Christian texts such as the Sleepers of Ephesus and their retellings in the Qur’an (Griffith 2008). Clare Wilde has surveyed Christian views of the Qur’an in medieval Arabic-speaking Christianity (Wilde 2014). J. Scott Bridger has surveyed medieval and contemporary Christian approaches to the Qur’an (Bridger 2015). C. Jonn Block composed a historical and thematic analysis of qur’anic ideas in medieval and contemporary Christian thought (Block 2014). Martin Whittingham and David Marshall have made substantial contributions to the study of Christian views of the Qur’an (Whittingham 2012; Marshall 2014).

Conclusion

The Qur’an remains both an attractive and problematic text for Christians. Christians typically interpret passages either to endorse the authenticity of their own scriptures and doctrines (an interior concern) or to engage Muslims (an exterior concern). Some authors cite passages from
the Qurʾān that portray Christians in a positive light and/or highlight its parallel stories about biblical figures. For Christians who use it in a positive way, the Qurʾān supports the truth of Christian faith and practice. They argue that it is possible to read passages in the Qurʾān that confirm the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Others draw attention to the Qurʾān’s problematic origins, collection, redaction, language and internal contradictions as a critique of its integrity and inimitability. For them, the Qurʾān is a flawed text that lacks merit for productive religious dialogue.

Most Christian writers believe that the Qurʾān can be used positively but only insofar as it confirms biblical truths or is used better to understand Muslim beliefs. From this perspective, Christians read some passages positively and at other points claim its verses misinterpret and alter the biblical message. Regardless of these assumptions about its status, most Christians interpret the Qurʾān without reference to its interpretation in the Muslim classical commentary literature. They belong to separate historical realms, so Christians believe that they can interpret the Qurʾān to uncover historical and/or theological truths apart from later tradition. It makes more sense for them to read it in light of pre-Islamic biblical and postbiblical literature.

In summary, contemporary Christians tend to display at least one of five attitudes towards the Qurʾān:

1. It should never be used (it is irrelevant to faith life, or not inspired, or not worth mentioning in religious discussions because that would lend it credibility)
2. It should be used to authenticate Christianity in an apologetic fashion
3. It should be used polemically to discredit its status
4. When it agrees with Christian teachings, it can be used as a text that contains partial truth and divine revelation (this ranges from using it according to the way Muslims understand it to using it as a path to biblical truth)
5. Although it is distinct from the Bible and Christian doctrine, it can be read in dialogue with Muslims in order to understand what they believe, cooperate on ethical and social issues and reflect on God’s plan for humankind.

These perspectives assume different stances towards the benefits that Christians might accrue from reading the Qurʾān. But they lead to some challenging questions regarding the use of scripture in dialogue. If Christians cannot by definition accede to fundamental Muslim propositions regarding the Qurʾān as God’s utterance, then why should Christians feel obligated to address the Qurʾān at all? Is it possible or even desirable to formulate a Christian response that can foster a broad sense of common ground regarding its status? One possible suggestion is that Christians might enrich their spiritual lives in personal reading. Others have tried to blend the two religions by reciting the Qurʾān in liturgical services or explaining how the scriptures hold equal authority (although these actions arguably form a syncretistic third religion). On the other hand, Christians might understand the Qurʾān as a product of late antique religious debate and part of the Christian heritage of the period or view the text through the lens of historical-critical thought and textual criticism (Marshall 2014: 98). If Christians remain faithful to their own scripture and tradition when reading the Qurʾān, they can only generate debate and make subversive analyses of it in comparison with Muslim views. But if, like all humans, Christians seek to acquire authentic knowledge of what is true, then continued exploration of the Qurʾān is conceivable. The pursuit of truth does not always result in mutual understanding but sometimes leads to competition and difference.
References


Christians and the Qurʾān


Further reading