THE DYNAMICS OF THE QUR’ĀNIC ACCOUNT OF CHRISTIANITY

Pim Valkenberg

The wording of the references to Christians and Christianity in the Qurʾān is rather different from the common names that Christians use for themselves. Therefore, it makes sense to focus on the specific way in which the Qurʾān refers to Christians and their religion, and also on the theological principles that can be seen underpinning this approach.

The Qurʾānic account of Christians as Naṣārā

When the Qurʾān refers to Christians, it does not use any of the words that have become almost universal in denoting followers of Jesus Christ: words that are either derived from the term Christ or its Hebrew antecedent Māšīḥa. The Qurʾān mainly refers to Christians in two ways: either by subsuming them, together with Jews and other possible recipients of divine revelation, in the more general category of āhl al-kitāb (‘People of the Book’ or ‘Scripture People’), or by specifically addressing them as Naṣārā. In the Islamic tradition, the latter term has been interpreted as an original Arabic name that either refers to the village where Jesus was born or to the group of the ansār (‘helpers’), which indicates the disciples of Jesus who claimed to be God’s helpers. However, most non-Muslim scholars have pointed out that the name is most likely derived from the Greek and Syriac terms that can be found in the New Testament: either a person from Nazareth (Matthew 2:23) or a follower of the sect of the Nazoreans (Acts 24:5). Some scholars have discussed the possibility that this term may point to a specific Judaeo-Christian heritage and that groups following this form of Christianity may have survived in the Arabian desert (Donner 2010: 31). But even though there are clear parallels between Qurʾānic legal materials and Judaeo-Christian sources (Zellentin 2013), it is not clear whether such coincidences can be traced back to influences. Moreover, some appeals to a Jewish form of Christianity with a low Christology betray a Christian theological agenda (Küng 2004: 73–8). Therefore, the present state of research does not give enough historical evidence to allow identification of such a Judaeo-Christian heritage in the Qurʾān, and it is probably best to see the Christians referred to in the text as mainstream Christians (Fiey 1993: 970; Griffith 2001: 311).

If the term Naṣārā is considered not as a self-designation by Christians but as an element in interreligious discourse in which others used it to describe them – and Christians sometimes started to use it for themselves as well – the Qurʾānic use of the term may gain a new significance (Steenbrink 2002: 202). Sidney Griffith has pointed out that the term was not as commonly used
in Greek and Syriac as the terms derived from the Greek *Christianos/oi* and its Syriac equivalent *Mšḥḥā’ā/yā’ā*, and, moreover, that it was often used by non-Christians with a negative connotation (Griffith 2011: 303). Since recent research has given ample evidence for the fact that the Qurʾān originally addressed an audience (not only in Medina, but in Mecca as well) that possessed a rather extensive knowledge of Christianity and of biblical stories related to the origins of Christianity (Neuwirth 2010: 393; Reynolds 2012: 154), it will be no coincidence that the Qurʾān uses *Naṣānā* with its non-Christian origins and its rather negative connotations as a term that Christians used for themselves, instead of the term *Masḥḥiyyūn*, which would be more common and less negative.

The composer of the Qurʾān was probably also well aware of the connotations of the name *al-naṣānā* among Christians and for this very reason uses the name in its text, even putting it into the mouths of the Christian interlocutors themselves, rhetorically precisely because of its potential for suggesting disapproval. (Griffith 2011: 315)

In this sense, it is possible to characterise the rhetorical strategy of the Qurʾān as at least in part a polemical strategy or a ‘qurʾānic counter-discourse’ (Azaiez 2015). As Mun‘im Sirry points out in his recent book on the subject, the Qurʾān does not shrink away from using terms that would not be recognised by those whom it criticises, such as the use of *mushrikuhn* (‘associators’, ‘polytheists’) for people who would definitely see themselves as monotheists (Sirry 2014: 36). If we understand such qurʾānic statements as polemical, it is unnecessary to look for a reality behind the polemical statement that Christians worshipped Mary or Jews ‘Uzayr. Instead, focus can be brought to bear on the strategy employed by the Qurʾān in addressing its adversaries (Sirry 2014: 50). For instance, in the Qurʾān God is introduced as questioning Jesus about the origins of the belief that he and his mother might be taken as gods beside God (Q 5:116). Similarly, Q 6:100–1 seems to suggest a form of *shirk* (ascribing partners to God) in which God has sons and daughters. Some scholars have suggested that there might have been a form of Christianity in which Mary would have been worshipped alongside God, such as the Arabian sect of the Collyridians mentioned by Epiphanius at the end of the fourth century. However, it is very well possible to read Q 5:116 not as a description of a deviant form of Christianity that cannot be verified historically but as a warning against excessive claims about Jesus and Mary (Thomas 2006: 370). Similarly, the two expressions ascribed to Christians in the fifth *sūra*, that ‘God is the Messiah, son of Mary’ and ‘God is the third of three’ (Q 5:72, 73) are curious if they are taken as direct descriptions of what Christians say, because Christians would normally say ‘Christ (Messiah) is the Son of God’ or ‘Word of God’, and they would identify him as the second, not the third, Person of the Trinity. Griffith points out that we should pay attention to the rhetorical strategy of the Qurʾān in addressing Christians:

The Qurʾān’s seeming misstatement, rhetorically speaking, should therefore not be thought to be a mistake, but rather a polemically inspired caricature, the purpose of which is to highlight in Islamic terms the absurdity, and therefore the wrongness, of the Christian belief, from an Islamic perspective. (Griffith 2011: 311)

In the same way the term *Naṣānā* in the Qurʾān does not necessarily refer to an otherwise unknown heretical group but to mainstream Christians who were certainly present in the Arabian desert from the beginning of the sixth century onwards; similarly,

The Christian doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation that the Qurʾān polemically rejects are most reasonably seen as the doctrines of the mainline Christian communities
The qurʾānic account of Christianity

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The qurʾānic account of Jews and Christians as ahl al-kitāb

The same rhetorical and polemical strategy is employed by the Qurʾān in terminology used for Jews and Christians together (and possibly others) who are addressed as ahl al-kitāb (usually translated as ‘People of the Book’). This time, it is the claim by Jews and Christians to possess a kitāb – a revelation from God – that is used by the Qurʾān against them.

The Arabic words ahl al-kitāb together form a construct phrase in which a noun ahl (‘people’ or ‘family’) is modified or specified by a second noun, in this case kitāb (‘something written’). Since both words are quite common and have different shades of meaning, it is important first to take a closer look at them separately. The word ahl basically means ‘people’ or ‘family’, but in the first part of a construct state it can also mean ‘worthy of’ or ‘deserving of’ (Badawi and Abdel Haleem 2008: 61). The word kitāb can have a number of different meanings, of which the most important are: written document, letter, divine record of all that takes place, or of each individual, revelation, particular revealed books such as Torah, New Testament and Qurʾān, teachings, decree, appointed time (Badawi and Abdel Haleem 2008: 796–8). So it is quite clear that the word kitāb often indicates a divine origin: ‘In qurʾānic usage the word represents a quintessentially divine activity and applies only rarely to human writing’ (Madigan 2001: 242–3).

Owing to this relationship with divine revelation, Daniel Madigan argues that the translation ‘book’ does not do justice to the complex background of this notion, and that the translation ‘scripture’ may do more justice even though it may also import Jewish and Christian understandings of the term into this qurʾānic usage. At the same time, it is clear that the notion of ‘scripture’ in the usage of ‘People of Scripture’ in the Qurʾān is derived from the Jewish and Christian interlocutors who claim to have received such revelation from God and to possess it in some form of writing. It is almost certain that they did not possess texts of their kitāb in Arabic at that time, though they may very well have possessed books in Aramaic or Syriac for liturgical use (Griffith 2013: 42). The Qurʾān makes polemical use of this claim in its often-repeated referral to itself as a kitāb, for instance the beginning of what Madigan calls ‘the text proper’ in Q 2:2: ‘that is the kitāb about which there is no doubt, a guidance for those who are God-fearing’ (Madigan 2001: 249, 2001a: 62). What is significant about this counterclaim is that at the time of this utterance the Qurʾān was not preserved in a written form, so the term kitāb cannot refer to a codex of some sort. It ‘rather expresses a claim as to the origin of the words on the Prophet’s lips: they are kitāb because they come from God, from the realm of God’s knowledge and authority, as these are symbolized by writing’ (Madigan 2001: 251). As Anne-Sylvie Boisliveau points out, in its frequent self-references the Qurʾān sees itself as ‘Holy Scripture’, an earthly copy of a book preserved in heaven (Boisliveau 2014: 39). Yet, while the heavenly book has been written and the Jews and Christians claim to possess written sources of revelation as well, the Qurʾān claims to be a kitāb while circulating in an oral form, even though the possibility of partial writings in deficient script on different materials should not be...
excluded. However, as Ingrid Mattson makes clear in her book, *The story of the Qurʾān* (Mattson 2008), the oral authority of the ‘recitation’ predominated and still predominates over the written authority of any *mushaf* (‘codex’). The experience of the Qurʾān was from the beginning, and for many Muslims still is, mainly an aural or an acoustic experience, as Angelika Neuwirth states (Neuwirth 2010: 169), or in the lapidary expression of Jane Dammen McAuliffe, ‘the Qurʾān is primarily sound, not script’ (McAuliffe 2006: 6).

The combination of these two words, *ahl* and *kitāb*, can be found in 31 verses of the Qurʾān, though similar constructions such as ‘those to whom the Scripture has been given’ can be found as well, so that the basic idea is mentioned in the Qurʾān about twice as often (Sharon 2004; Albayrak 2008). Most of these references seem to occur in the context of discussions, mostly with Jews and/or Christians in Medina. Angelika Neuwirth points to a relatively irenic text in which the term might have been used for the first time:

[Believers], argue only in the best way with the People of the Book, except with those of them who act unjustly. Say, We believe in what was revealed to us and in what was revealed to you; our God and your God is one [and the same]; we are devoted to Him.

(Q 29:46)

While the term *ahl al-kitāb* is used here without negative connotations, this text already presupposes on the one hand a debate between Jews and Christians, who claim to possess a written and therefore authoritative version of God’s revelation, and on the other the community of the Qurʾān that claims an equal authoritative status for its revelation that has not yet been written down (Neuwirth 2010: 145). Most of the references to *ahl al-kitāb* come in the *sūras* that are traditionally dated to the Medinan period, and they address either Jews or – less frequently – Christians, or a combination of both. Strangely enough, the text quoted here is the only text in which Christians are the only group addressed, according to the famous Muslim interpreter al-Ṭabarī (Sharon 2004: 43), though in some cases the context clearly suggests that Christians are addressed, such as Q 4:171, which admonishes Christians not to exceed the limits by saying ‘three’.

The majority of the references to the ‘People of Scripture’ form part of an extended discussion with Jews or Christians or both groups in some of the longer *sūras* that are usually dated towards the end of Muḥammad’s life. In these texts, it becomes clear that the term *ahl al-kitāb* acknowledges that Jews and Christians have been given a scripture by God, but that does not imply they are possessors of this scripture. Quite the contrary: they have not lived up to what God entrusted them with. This is indicated in expressions such as ‘they threw the Book of God over their shoulders’ (Q 2:101), they ‘hide the truth that they know’ (Q 2:146) and they ‘conceal the Scripture that God sent down and sell it for a small price’ (Q 2:174). So, the words *ahl al-kitāb* do not indicate what Jews and Christians possess but what they have often lost: the polemical suggestion of the Qurʾān is that they have hidden it, or sold it, or even distorted it or written it with their own hands (Q 3:78; 2:79). The terminology here seems to suggest that Jews and Christians have corrupted the texts they received or distorted their meanings, and this has led the later Islamic tradition to accuse them of *tahrīf*, or corruption of letter or meaning. Yet in the original context it seems likely that the accusation is related to their unwillingness to accept the possibility of a new revelation from God. This is the main accusation that the Qurʾān asserts by using the term ‘People of Scripture’: they trust in what they have in their hands instead of trusting in God’s grace and his ability to give whenever He wants to give (Q 3:73; 5:64).

Perhaps the best-known text associated with Christians as People of Scripture is the so-called ‘Common Word’ text that the Islamic tradition of *asbāb al-nuzūl* (‘occasions of revelations’)

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connects with a historical event in the life of Muhammad: the visit of a delegation of Christians from Najrān in present-day Yemen that led to a dispute about Jesus, the traces of which can still be found in Sūrat Al 'Imrān: 'In God's eyes Jesus is just like Adam: He created him from dust, said to him, 'Be', and he was' (Q 3:58). The Qurʾān emphatically states that this is the truth from God, and it suggests that Muhammad offered to enter into an ordeal (mubahala, Q 3:61) together with his family in order to invoke God's curse on the party that was not telling the truth about Jesus. The Qurʾān suggests that the Christians turned away, and in this context the 'Common Word' verse follows: 'Say, “People of the Book, let us arrive at a statement that is common to us all: we worship God alone, we ascribe no partner to Him, and none of us takes others beside God as lords.” If they turn away, say, “Witness our devotion to Him” ’ (Q 3:64).

Even though this verse is introduced by Muslim scholars and accepted by many Christians as common ground between the two religions in present-day Muslim–Christian relations (Volf et al. 2010), the wording in the Qurʾān clearly addresses a situation in which doctrinal differences concerning Jesus make such common ground rather difficult (Lumbard 2009). What the Qurʾān suggests is not common ground but rather a clearly worded defence of tawḥīd (oneness of God). If Christians can come up with an equitable word (kalima sawād‘) that states they accept that God is one, without partnership and without any lord beside Him, there might be room for common ground (Saritoprak 2009). But the Qurʾān is aware of the fact that Christians are not likely to accept this, and therefore it reiterates: ‘If they turn away, say, “Witness that we are devoted (ashhadū bi-annā muslimūn)”’. It is possible that ‘not taking others as lords’ has a double meaning here: apart from protesting against Christians saying ‘Christ is the Lord’, the Qurʾān may also refer to prostration before earthly lords such as kings, as the authors of the ‘Common word’ document explain (Volf et al. 2010: 47). Next to the doctrinal issues concerning Christ, the Qurʾān could address social justice issues as well. While it is not impossible to interpret this text as being addressed to both Christians and Jews, the context clearly suggests that the Christian aberrations concerning Christ are addressed here once again. Yet the next verse addresses the People of the Book once again, and this time it is clear that both Jews and Christians are meant: ‘People of the Book, why do you argue about Abraham when the Torah and the Gospels were not revealed until after his time? Do you not understand?’ (Q 3:65). This time, it is clear that the Qurʾān targets Jews and Christians who claim to be part of the heritage of Abraham in saying that he was a Jew or a Christian. Against this, the Qurʾān argues: ‘Abraham was neither a Jew, nor a Christian. He was upright and devoted to God, never an idolater’ (Q 3:67). The words translated as ‘upright and devoted’ are intentionally ambiguous in this context: Abraham was a ḥanīf, a true God-seeker or monotheist who does not belong to a specific religious tradition, but he was also a muslim, ‘someone devoted to God’ – but in Arabic there is no difference between muslim and Muslim.

A final text that shows how the Qurʾān addresses the ‘People of Scripture’ and their claims to be in a special relationship with God that exempts them from having to take the Qurʾānic claim seriously comes from Sūrat al-tawba, which is generally seen as one of the last and most polemical texts to be revealed. It reflects a situation of warfare with Christians and possibly Jews, and even a situation in which the latter have submitted to Islamic dominance by paying the jizya tax. The tone is quite negative since most of the ‘People of the Book’ are not considered as believers here but as unbelievers who take others as associates with God. At the same time, there seems to be a social critique directed at misuse of religious authority and lack of humility as well.

Fight those of the People of the Book who do not [truly] believe in God and the Last Day, who do not forbid what God and his Messenger have forbidden, who do not obey
the rule of justice, until they pay the tax promptly and agree to submit. The Jews said, ‘Ezra is the son of God’, and the Christians said, ‘The Messiah is the son of God’: they said this with their own mouths, repeating what earlier disbelievers had said. May God thwart them! How far astray they have been led! They take their rabbis and their monks as lords beside God, as well as Christ, the son of Mary. But they were commanded to serve only one God: there is no god but Him; He is far above whatever they set up as His partners! They try to extinguish God’s light with their mouths, but God insists on bringing His light to its fullness, even if the disbelievers hate it. It is He who has sent his Messenger with guidance and the religion of truth, to show that it is above all [other] religions, however much the idolaters may hate this. You who believe, many rabbis and monks wrongfully consume people’s possessions and turn people away from God’s path. [Prophet], tell those who hoard gold and silver instead of giving in God’s cause that they will have a grievous punishment.

(Q 9:29–34)

In this long text, or rather series of texts, Christians and Jews are clearly discussed in tandem. The parallel with the Christians might explain the otherwise remarkable assertion that Jews claim Ezra (ʿUzayr) to be the son of God; in a similar way rabbis (aḥbār) and monks (muhbān) are juxtaposed as being taken as lords (arbāb) besides God, but also as people who hoard money and commit social injustice and thus lead people away from God. The main point is clear: if people are devoted to the one true God, they will not take others as lords, and these lords will not be elevated to positions in which they might misuse their power. All of this, one could argue, is a direct consequence of tawḥīd, as it is formulated in some of the most positive texts on Christians and Jews (and others as well): if they believe in God, in the Last Day, and act righteously, they will have their reward with God (Q 2:62). But Sūra 9 seems to default to the reverse situation: most of the Jews and the Christians are unbelievers. Yet at the same time a new polemical point is added: unbelief also implies not accepting the sovereignty of the Messenger of God, and therefore it also implies not accepting to pay the head tax as a sign of their submission. The political consequence of the strong connection between ‘God and His Messenger’ seems to become explicit here in a connection between submission to God and submission to the guidance and the prohibitions of Muhammad’s rule. Yet this is a late development in the Qurʾān that is added to the overarching theme of the unity of God.

Key notions determining the Qurʾānic approach to Christians: tawḥīd and risāla

A final aspect of the text just mentioned may serve as an introduction to the two key notions that determine the Qurʾānic approach to Christians: the unity of God or tawḥīd and the function of Muhammad as prophet (nabī) and messenger (rasūl) of God. The phrase that connects the two notions is introduced by ‘they try to extinguish God’s light with their mouths’ while God ‘insists on bringing His light to its fullness’. The reference to God’s light (nūr Allāh) suggests the effulgence of God’s revelation, just like in the famous light verse (Q 24:35), where God, who is ‘light of the heavens and earth’ sends His light to guide humankind. Yet, in this case, many Jews and Christians refuse to accept the light, trying to ‘talk it down’. Their not accepting the light of God’s new revelation is seen in the Qurʾān as a double error: it is a refusal to recognise God’s messenger – which is, in the case of the Jews, a reiteration of their refusal to accept Jesus as messenger of God, and it is a refusal to recognise God’s ability to bestow His revelation upon humanity once again. In a similar context the Jews are quoted as saying ‘God is tight-fisted’, but the Qurʾān
asserts that ‘God’s hand is open wide’ (Q 5:64) and that ‘all grace is in God’s hands: He grants it to whoever He will’ (Q 3:73). The Qurʾān defends the truth of the messenger with his revelation from God and God’s ability to give His grace freely over against the Jewish and Christian notions of election and uniqueness.

[The Qurʾān does not explain how the Christians degenerated from believers in the pure monotheism brought to them by Jesus, just as it does not explain why the Jews refused to acknowledge Muḥammad. It simply intimates that the two religious groups are closed in and exclusive, too haughty and full of themselves to see the truth they have been shown.]

(Thomas 2013: 153)

In its approach to Christians, both as a separate group and as part of the People of Scripture, the Qurʾān applies a double criterion to determine the true devotion of Christians: confessing the Oneness of God (tawḥīd) and accepting the new message (risāla) brought by Muḥammad. The double criterion seems to function differently, though, in the different stages of the qurʾānic message: in the beginning, the oneness of God as the focus of faith is connected strongly with belief in the Last Day and doing good; in the final sūras, however, the oneness of God becomes more and more related to acceptance of the message of the Qurʾān itself that refers to its heavenly identity as a kitāb from God and to acceptance of the bringer of the message, the Prophet Muḥammad. As a consequence of this shift, Christians are approached less as true monotheists who trust in God, have faith in the Last Day and act righteously, even though there are still some Christians who are praised in this vein. More and more, Christians are now approached as people who have become unfaithful to the Injīl message that God gave to Jesus and to the identity of Jesus as servant and prophet of God. Instead of following the true faith of Jesus, they started to trust their religious innovations more than God’s messengers, and their refusal to accept the Qurʾān and Muḥammad as instances of God’s ability to send His light to guide people once more only shows how they have become untrue to the one they claim to worship in their religion.

References


**Further reading**


