



THE CENTRE FOR MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN STUDIES

Newsletter

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THE CENTRE FOR
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STUDIES

O X F O R D

www.cmcsoxford.org.uk

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Welcome

A warm welcome to this first Newsletter from the Centre for Muslim-Christian Studies. Here you will find research being presented at the Centre—work which does not follow a party line, but asks the reader to think. I also want to highlight the Centre's new website, www.cmcsoxford.org.uk. I wish you fruitful reading and browsing.

Dr Martin Whittingham

Director, CMCS

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Seminar Series, Hilary Term 2010

We invite you to a series of informal Weekly Research Seminars, an opportunity to present work-in-progress and to receive informed comment from others, Tuesdays from 2.30–4.00 pm. For further information, contact John Chesworth, Seminar Co-ordinator, e-mail j.chesworth@cmcsoxford.org.uk

2 February: *The Foundation of al-Ghazālī's Politics*

Yazeed Said, Doctoral Candidate,
Corpus Christi College, University of
Cambridge

9 February: *Is Religious Violence Theologically Justified? The nature and importance of doctrines of abrogation within two contemporary UK Islamic views on jihād*

Nick Chatrath, Doctoral Candidate,
Wadham College, University of Oxford

16 February: *Kadhi's Courts in Kenya and Tanzania: reactions and responses*

Dr John Chesworth, Lecturer, Centre
for Muslim-Christian Studies

23 February: *Medieval Muslim Juristic Discussion About Muslims Living Under Christian Rule*

Steven Gertz, MPhil Candidate,
Pembroke College, University of
Oxford

2 March: *Annual Joint Lecture*

9 March: *Muslims in China*
Dr Yang Guiping, Visiting Fellow,
Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies,
Institute of Religious Studies, Central
University for Nationalities in China

Annual Joint Lecture



Prof Mahmoud Ayoub (Co-Director Macdonald Center for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, Hartford Seminary, *left*) and Dr Martin Whittingham (Director, Centre for Muslim-Christian Studies, *right*) will give public lectures in the Examination Schools, High Street, Oxford, at 5pm on Tuesday, 2 March, 2010.

The Concepts of Revelation in Islam and Christianity: a help or a hindrance to dialogue?

Prof Mahmoud Ayoub, Co-Director,
Duncan Macdonald Center for the
Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim
Relations, Hartford Seminary

A History of Muslim Views of the Bible

Dr Martin Whittingham, Director,
Centre for Muslim-Christian Studies

See pages 2 & 3 for more
from these speakers

Building respect and seeking truth

Any views or opinions presented in this newsletter do not necessarily represent those of the Centre for Muslim-Christian Studies.

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Muslim Approaches to the Bible

Martin Whittingham

Muslims typically ask three questions when thinking about the Bible. Is the Bible *corrupted*, and if so, in what sense? Next, is the Bible completely *superseded* by the *Qur'ān*? Finally, how might the Bible be *used* by Muslims, if at all? Another way Muslims might address these three issues would be to ask is the Bible truthful, is it still relevant, and can it be useful? These are questions I am pursuing in my current research for a book on the history of Muslim responses to the Bible. Of course, it is impossible to do justice to the complex history of Muslim responses to the Bible here. Instead, I shall look at a number of *Qur'ānic* verses to highlight some of the critical issues.

Sūra 2 (al-Baqara):285 states that all (Muslim) believers believe in 'God, his angels, his books and his messengers'. It is well known that Muslims believe in a long sequence of prophets, including figures also prominent in the Bible, such as Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David and Jesus. But what does it mean for Muslims to believe in God's 'books', in the plural? Does this require Muslims to accept the Bible as it now exists?

The *Qur'ān* refers multiple times to the scriptures given to the Jews and Christians. These are known as the *Tawrāt* (Torah), the *Zabūr* (Psalms) and the *Injīl* (Gospel). The *Qur'ān* makes at least 150 direct or implicit references to these scriptures, most of them positive. But of course these *Qur'ānic* references raise many important questions of their own. What exactly is being referred to in the *Qur'ān*? If it is not the Bible as it now exists, but a pristine text in agreement with Islam, as some Muslims argue, what happened to this original text? Furthermore, how did the earliest Muslims gain access to information about the contents of the Bible? We should not imagine the early Muslim community sitting down to compare the

Qur'ān with a written copy of the Bible. The evidence suggests that there was no complete translation into Arabic of either the Old or New Testaments until after the rise of Islam.¹ If information was orally passed on from Jews and Christians, how were Muslims supposed to assess these 'previous scriptures', as the *Qur'ān* describes them?

This set of questions is one of many areas of Muslim responses to the Bible on which no settled consensus exists. Another is the presence of Muḥammad in the Biblical text. *Qur'ān 7:157* refers to Muḥammad as the one 'whom they find mentioned in their *Tawrāt* and *Injīl*'. So which Biblical verses are meant here? Some Muslims argue that since Muḥammad is absent from the Bible, this is proof enough that the texts have been corrupted. Al-Juwaynī (d. 1085) states this at the outset of his book on the Bible.² Other Muslims approach this problem by finding implicit references to Muḥammad in Biblical verses. Amongst many examples, they cite *Haggai 2:7*'s reference to 'the desire of all the nations' in the Old Testament, and in the New Testament, they understand the Paraclete in *John 16:7* to be a reference to Muḥammad. This approach was used in the early centuries of Islam and is still found in more recent works.³

Returning to the idea of a corrupted Biblical text, how early did this idea arise amongst Muslims? It is easy to assume that it is there from the beginning, written into the *Qur'ān* itself. For example, *Sūra 2 (al-Baqara):75*, states this of the Jews of Madīna: 'a group of them did hear the Word of God, then after they understood it, they knowingly perverted it'. Yet these verses were often taken in early *Qur'ānic* exegesis as referring to specific groups of Jews at the time of Muḥammad, indicating that a sound text was available at that time. In addition,

Muslim scholars understood these Jews not to be tampering with the text itself but elaborating on it orally in reciting or explaining it.⁴

The story of Muslim responses to the Bible between the emergence of the *Qur'ān* and the present day is indeed complex. The effort to understand this story involves tracing who influenced whom. It also involves examining the social and political situations of the writers, since anyone feeling threatened is more likely to respond with hostility. Yet when it comes to the Biblical texts, some Muslim scholars from previous centuries as well as recent times express some qualified acceptance of the Bible. One contemporary Muslim scholar writes: 'If the texts have remained more or less as they were in the seventh century CE, the reverence the *Qur'ān* has shown them at the time should be retained even today. Many interpreters of the *Qur'ān*, from al-Ṭabarī to al-Rāzī to Ibn Taymiyya and even Quṭb, appear to be inclined to share this view' [emphasis original].⁵ The language is provisional, leaving questions still to be answered, but this makes the invitation to explore these important issues all the more appealing.

Notes

- 1 On the Gospels in Arabic, see Sidney Griffith, 'The Gospel in Arabic: An Inquiry into its Appearance in the First Abbasid Century' in *Arabic Christianity in the Monasteries of Ninth Century Palestine* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1992).
- 2 al-Juwaynī, *Shifā' al-Ghalīl*, Arabic text and French translation in Michel Allard, *Textes Apologétiques de Ğuwainī* (Beirut: Dar al-Machreq, 1968), 39.
- 3 See, for example, 'Abdul-Ahad Dawūd, *Muhammad in the Bible* (Durban: Islamic Propagation Centre International, 1990 reprint). This work dates from the early twentieth century.
- 4 See Gordon Nickel, 'Early Muslim Accusations of *Tahrīf*: Muqātil Ibn Sulayman's Commentary on Key Qur'anic Verses' in David Thomas, ed., *The Bible in Arab Christianity* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 207-23.
- 5 Abdullah Saeed, 'The Charge of Distortion of Jewish and Christian Scriptures' in *Muslim World* 92 (2002), 434.

Dr Martin Whittingham is Director of the Centre for Muslim-Christian Studies.

Revelation in Christianity and Islam

Mahmoud Ayoub

For religions with both a belief and ritualistic system, the concept of revelation is foundational. Revelation takes place through dreams, apparitions, direct or indirect communication, or divine manifestation through prayers or meditation. In the monotheistic religions of the Middle East, revelation comes to a prophet, soothsayer or seer, or a priest or saintly friend (*walī*) of God.

Christian revelation is unique in that it combines divine communication through the Holy Spirit, and divine manifestation or self disclosure through the incarnation of the Divine Word (*logos*). Because revelation in Islam is continuous with ancient Semitic pre-Biblical and Biblical concepts, a word must be said about some of these ancient views of revelation.

Prevalent in all the major religions of Mesopotamia is the idea of a divine or heavenly book. This may be the Book of Life, for example, or the Book of Destiny. Another form is primordial myths, such as the Epic of Atra-Hasis of ancient Sumer, or the Epics of Gilgamesh and Enuma Elish of Babylon. Still other forms are dreams and divination, auguries and omens. What concerns us here, however, is revelation as divine communication of heavenly books or tablets.

The Hebrew Bible is a library of revealed books spanning a period of at least a thousand years. The Torah (the first five books of the Bible) presents at least two forms of revelation: divine direct communication to Adam, Noah, and Abraham, and divine dictation to Moses of the Torah. It is also believed

that the tablets were not dictated, but written by God. In this regard, reference should be made to the ancient/Islamic concept of a primordial heavenly pen, which moves and records on a special heavenly tablet the destinies of human beings from the beginning to the end of the world.

Revelation in the Bible often comes through prophetic utterances on behalf of God. This form of divine communication appears either in an oracular form or through prophetic announcements of God's decisions and manifestations of His pleasure or anger with the covenanted people of Israel. Such commands or utterances are prefaced with the phrase, 'thus saith the Lord'.

Still another form of Biblical revelation is apocalyptic visions, a late, and largely post-Biblical form of divine communication. Apocalyptic revelations are eschatological in nature and purpose. Here the phrase, 'thus saith the Lord' is replaced with the dramatic announcement, 'behold and I saw.' The books of Ezekiel and Daniel of the Old Testament and the Book of Revelation in the New Testament represent this form of revelation in the Bible.

The writing and redaction of the books that came to constitute the New Testament took at least two centuries. This is of course a much shorter period than that of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, but is still considerable when compared with the period of revelation and redaction of the *Qur'ān*. Furthermore, the four canonical Gospels were chosen from a plethora of 'synoptic Type' and Gnostic gospels, while the

Qur'ān is associated with one man, the Prophet Muhammad, and was revealed to him alone. These books were believed by Christians until the Reformation not to have been revealed, but to have been inspired by the Holy Spirit. Thus, strictly speaking, they are not 'the Word of God', but the inspired words of their authors. The Bible's epithet 'Word of God' comes from Luther's emphasis on the Bible alone (*sola scriptura*) and the general re-discovery by the Reformed Churches of the Bible as an alternative moral, social, spiritual, and even political, source of authority to that of the Catholic Church.

Revelation in Christianity is not divine communication, or what the *Qur'ān* calls *wahī*, but divine disclosure or manifestation in and through Christ. Hence, the Gospels are not in reality 'revelation', but the history of the 'self-revelation of God through Christ'. Can Christians, then, really be considered 'people of the Book' (*ahl al-kitāb*), as the *Qur'ān* and Islamic tradition have insisted?

I believe that there is room for meaningful dialogue between our two faith-communities. For this to be achieved, however, we must look at revelation in our two traditions on their own terms. Only then will we be able to examine meaningfully and constructively what appears to be two diametrically opposed views of revelation.

Prof Mahmoud Ayoub is Co-Director of the Duncan Black Macdonald Center for the Study of Islam and Christian/Muslim Relations, Hartford Seminary.

A Muslim Perspective on Divine Incarnation and Divine Communication

Muslim, Christian and Jewish Physicians on Wine

Daniel Nicolae

The earliest Islamic reference to the medicinal use of wine may be found in the *Sūra of the Bees* (*Qur'ān* 16:39-69). There it mentions wine made from grapes and either coconuts or dates, but we are also introduced to a mysterious, colourful and apparently alcoholic drink which comes from the 'entrails' of bees, a drink which is a 'remedy for mankind'. Is the *Qur'ān*, then, describing honey wine as medicine? This might be a reference to honey, but that is unlikely as *sharāb*, literally a 'drink', suggests something more fluid and could mean something alcoholic.

Other passages in the *Qur'ān* are less in favour of alcohol beverages, and religious scholars have explained that the different *Qur'ānic* accounts should be read in a certain chronological order. The last and thus binding revelation is that wine (*khamr*) is the work of Satan (*Qur'ān* 5:91), thereby strictly forbidding the consumption of wine in Islam. As for its medicinal use, a ninth-century *ḥadīth* collection records that the prophet Muhammad thought drinking wine would lead to illness, not heal ailments.

What did prominent Muslim physicians think about wine and why would they use it? The most influential medieval treatise on medicinal substances was written by the physician Ibn al-Baytār (d. 1248). In his *Comprehensive Book on Simple Drugs and Foodstuffs*, he combined his own observations with the accounts he read in other books. In his section on wine,¹ Ibn Baytār first cited Dioscorides (a Greek physician of the first century) with his discourse on the different kinds and properties of grape wines. Subsequently, he discussed the ideas of the very eminent physician al-Rāzī (d. 925) who was active in the hospitals of Baghdad and Rayy. He recommends patients drink wine daily to improve

their health, as long as wine is consumed in moderation, or about three cups a day. Al-Rāzī even allows for drunkenness once or twice a month, but warns that if it occurs too often, patients may suffer headaches, liver complications, epilepsy and even death. Ibn al-Baytār then discusses these negative effects in detail and suggests several ways to counteract them.

Despite certain caveats concerning the use or abuse of wine, Ibn al-Baytār gives no references to any religious strictures. We could have expected that he would provide alternative remedies for those who were not allowed to drink wine. However, the medical heritage of the Greeks was apparently more important to Ibn al-Baytār than what religious authorities had to say on the topic. Ibn al-Baytār and al-Rāzī are not alone with their positive attitudes toward wine. The Muslim philosopher Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037) wrote the most influential medical encyclopaedia of the Middle Ages, the *Canon of Medicine*, and he too did not mention any religious problems when he discussed the medicinal use of wine.

Was the attitude of Christian or Jewish physicians different from those of their Muslim counterparts? The Nestorian Christian Ibn Butlān, an eleventh-century physician who was mainly active in Syria and Egypt, devoted a section of his influential treatise, *The Almanac of Health*, to alcoholic drinks, wine, and the prevention of hang-over.² Again, no reference to alternative remedies or the religious prohibition of wine may be found. However, Maimonides (d. 1204), the great Jewish theologian who worked as a physician at the court of Salah al-Dīn in Cairo, suggested wine regimen would not be appropriate for Muslims as grape wine is prohibited according to Islamic law.³ In his letters to Muslim

nobles, Maimonides nonetheless enumerates the benefits of wine because his training as a physician make it incumbent on him to inform his reader about the most beneficial treatments, whether they are forbidden or not. Maimonides believes that physicians prior to him were aware of *Qur'ānic* censure regarding wine and provided alternative prescriptions for those who could not drink it. Yet Maimonides seems to have been the first to provide such a prescription in a medical treatise. He also differs in his views about drunkenness. In contrast to al-Rāzī or even Ibn Sīnā, he states that inebriation is always dangerous, even if it only occurs once a month.

Why did physicians like Ibn al-Baytār, al-Rāzī, and Ibn Sīnā not mention any religious dimensions when writing about wine? The poet Abū Nuwās (d. 814) seems to have been aware of religious criticism when he writes in his famous wine poem, 'Give up now, critic, stop your diatribe, your reprimand just drives me to drink more. Reproach is not the treatment to prescribe, the cure lies in the poison, so now pour!'⁴ Perhaps physicians were equally aware of such criticism, but depending on how much they viewed themselves as heirs of a purely secular art, most physicians simply ignored the religious strictures on wine.

Notes

- 1 Ibn al-Baytar, *Al-Jam' al-Mufradāt al-Adwiyah wa-l-aghdhīyah*, vol. 2 (Cairo: al-Matba'ah al-'Amirah, 1875), 69-76.
- 2 Hosam Elkhadem (ed. and trans.), *Le 'Taqwīm al-sihha' (Tacuini sanitatis) d'Ibn Butlān: Une traité médical du XIe siècle. Histoire du texte, édition critique, traduction, commentaire*, Académie royale de Belgique, Classe des lettres, Fonds René Draguet 7 (Leuven: Peeters, 1990), 100-101.
- 3 Cf. Gerrit Bos (ed. and trans.), *On Asthma* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2002), 32-33.
- 4 Jim Colville, *Poems of wine and revelry: the khamriyyat of Abu Nuwas* (London: Kegan Paul, 2005), 3.

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