The Islamic view of Christians: Qur'an and Hadith

Revised version from Islam and Christianity 0/2001, edited for conference Bouaké 11–20.10.2002.

Muslims (sometimes even Non-muslims) complain about Christians – or Western society – insisting on portraying Islam as "the enemy". They believe that Christians especially precondemn Muslims whereas Muslims "tolerate" Christians and accept them "without prejudice". But is that really the whole picture? What does the Qur'an and Muslim Tradition (hadith) teach when it comes to Christians, the Christian faith and the Bible? What will an "average" Muslim think coming into contact with a Christian? Would he think more positively about Christians or be hesitant and distance himself from them?

Since Islam was not proclaimed by Muhammad until the 7th century AD the Bible can contain no explicit judgement about Islam. Any opinion that Christians have about Islam arises out of their general understanding of Scripture which leads to an enormous variety of opinions and positions about Islam both inside and outside the Christians churches.

When Christians are accused of not being enough open for interreligious dialogue with Muslims and of not even expecting to find part of God's revelation and truth in Islam, people often do not keep in mind that convinced Muslims would never accept such an approach to dialogue either. Contrary to the Christian who has to find his own position concerning Islam, the Muslim picture of Christianity and the Christian faith is already relatively fixed. It is fixed because of the Qur'anic statements which as a revelation after Christ makes many statements about Christians and the Christian faith which have been later all in all underlined and confirmed by Muslim tradition (hadith). Since there has never been an "Islamic enlightenment" in the European sense of the word and no official historical-critical Qur'an exegesis or Qur'an analysis, there is only limited manoeuvring space for exegesis and alternative interpretation of Qur'an texts and traditions as normative texts.

Christians as seen by the Qur'an

In the Qur'an we find a complex picture of Christians and the Christian faith: We know that Muhammad must have got some knowledge of Christianity in the 7th century AD on the Arabian Peninsula as well as during his trade tours to Syria (and perhaps other surrounding countries). As far as we know Muhammad only met single Christians – eremites, monks – but there seems to have been no church of the New Testament type on the Arabian Peninsula in his time. As far as the few written sources tell us, there was no complete Arabic Bible translation in existence at Muhammad's lifetime. The Christian faith on the Arabian Pensinsula was practised mostly in church languages like Syrian which ordinary Arabic speaking people could not understand. As a consequence, most churches must have been as far as sources tell us – unbalanced in their doctrines, since at least some monophysitistic Christian churches in Syria and Abessinia venerated Mary as being the "mother of God", adhered to a Nestorian form of Christianity or practised a monophysitistic form of faith.

The piety of the Christians

At the beginning of his proclamation of Islam, Muhammad very much hoped to be accepted as a prophet of God by Christians as well as by Jews. He considered both religions more highly developed than that of the Arabs, the "heathens", and he accepted Jews and Christians as "people of the book" (arab. ahl al-kitab). He likewise hoped that they would accept him as a prophet sent to the Arabs with a revelation from God. Not only did he accept Jews and Christians as "people of the book", but he first also proclaimed a similar form of fasting like the Jews practised it, and he proclaimed Jerusalem as the direction for ritual prayer. Later, he abolished both of these practises by other revelations.

Additionally to that, Muhammad first praised the piety of the Christians, their love, their humbleness, their faith, as we read in Sura 5:82:

> "And you will find the nearest of them in affection to those who believe (to be) those who say: 'We are Christians. That is because there are among them priests and monks, and because they are not proud" (5:82).

Probably at about the same time the Qur'an tells us that the Christians do have knowledge of God, that they believe in God and the Last Day and that they do not have any reason to be afraid of the Last Judgement (2:62). Also sura 3:110 confirms: "Some of them are believers", although the same sura in the next sentence restricts: "but most of them are evil-livers" (blasphemers). At the same time this verse also considers the Muslims to be of higher rank than any other group:

> "You are the best community that has been raised up for mankind. You enjoin right conduct and forbid indecency; and you believe in Allah" (3:110).

Especially this statement about the "best community" (arab. kuntum haira ummatin), i. e. the community of the Muslims, is still quite important for the convinced Muslim's own identity in relationship to Nonmuslims.

The Qur'an further states that the Christians tried to convert Muhammad to Christianity (2:135), to which he responded by calling them become his followers as he claimed to be the 'interpreter' of their scriptures (5:15) who corrects what they have falsified. Both the Jews as well as the Christians refused (2:111).

The Christians' disapproval of Muhammad

As Muhammad continued to preach in Medina after 622 AD, the Muslim-Christian relationship came to a standstill because of the two sides' mutual disapproval of the other's theological position. The prophet's dislike of the Christians grew, while he actively opposed the three great Jewish tribes politically and expulsed them from and killed them in Medina. He was convinced that he was not bringing a new revelation but only proclaiming the only message that had ever been sent down from eternity in a pure form, the same message preached by all prophets ever since Adam. Since Christians rejected Muhammad's claim to be a prophet from God, and since their message deviated from his, he accused them of falsifying Scripture and opposed those Christian dogmas which deviated from his revelations, which he believed to correspond to the original message.

One of the most important reproaches to the Christians involves the Trinity (2:116; 5:73),

which Muhammad however misunderstood as a "trinity" of the father, Jesus Christ, the son, and Mary, his mother. According to the Muslims, this Christian doctrine is the greatest sin possible, the unforgivable offense of "shirk" ("shirk": associating a partner at God's side). Christians err in their understanding of the sonship of Jesus (5:72; 9:30), since Jesus according to the Qur'an is only a human being, a prophet and messenger of God sent to Israel. And the Christians err in their belief in the crucifixion of Jesus 84:157–158) and in their doctrine on the fall of mankind.

It was perhaps at this time of growing estrangement from the Christians that Muhammad proclaimed to have received the revelation of a Qur'an verse which has been often quoted by today's Muslim fundamentalistic groups. This text openly refers to Christians as "evil-doers" or "evil-livers" and warns the Muslims against taking Christians as their friends:

> "O you who believe! Take not the Jews and Christians for friends. They are friends one to another. He among you who takes them for friends is (one) of them. Lo! Many of mankind are evil-livers" (5:51).

Are Christians unbelievers?

During this period of increasing disassociation, the Qur'an also tells us that Christians insist on their (false) theological positions and that they are "turned away" (5:75). They "confound the truth with falsehood and knowingly conceal the truth" (3:71) and therefore "Allah fights against them. How perverse are they!" (9:30), because they stick to the sonship of Jesus.

Also many exhortations "to kill (or slay) the unbelievers" are found in the Qur'an (e. g. 2:191; 4:89) as well as the statement that the unbelievers "will abide in the fires of hell". But neither the Qur'an nor Muslim theology provides a clear-cut unanimous identification of the "unbelievers": if it is the Christians, if the "people of the book" can be understood to be unbelievers or not, if this verse is only of contemporary importance and means those unbelievers of Muhammad's lifetime or if it still refers to those who have heard the call of Islam but have refused to follow. Qur'anic statements about Non-Muslims are so complex and elastic that specific interpretations and their consequences for modern applications depend on presumptions not to be found within the text but only in the personal attitude of the individual.

Emotional problems for Muslims by Western Criticism of the Qur'an

In many Muslim countries Christians are a minority, sometimes Christians do not have access to better schools and jobs, do not play any important role in society and are wilfully held back from positions of influence and prestige. In other countries they suffer from persecution. In all these countries, the Muslim majority would be never exposed to open critcism of Islam. Muslims are of the opinion that this is only as it should be, as Christians are considered to be "dhimmis" (protegés) under Islamic guardianship. At the same time, the Quran as well as many Muslim writers and theologians openly and sometimes even harshly critisize the Christians, the Bible and the Christian faith. Therefore, some Muslims are under shock when they immigrate to the West because in their eyes Islam is critsized "all the time" there, as a Muslim complained about in recent email conversation. This creates emotional problems for many Muslims as the Christian majority holds a position in Western society where they are no subjugates to Islam, but it is them who are making the rules for the Muslim immigrants. And anybody critcising any religion does not have to look

for an excuse. In this way, things are turned upside down in the Muslims' eyes.

Everyone knows how unwise it is in most cases to question Muhammad or to critizise Islam in a conversation with a Muslim friend as doors may be closed forever (only in some cases open conversation may be possible if both are already good friends, the Muslim is alone with his Christian friend and not with his family – otherwise he lose his face – and he is not a very devout Muslim).

Christians and Christianity as viewed by contemporary Muslims

It is only to be expected that later Muslim scholars reiterated and wrote within the confines of this rather ambivalent Quranic presentation of Christianity. Islamic apologetics more often emphasise the later, negative Quranic sayings. Over time, these have acquired normative value, abrogating those earlier, more positive statements about Christianity. Christians violate Islam's central dogma of tauhid (uniqueness of God) – and this is the gravest sin possible as many writers hold. This is only made worse by their rejection of Muhammad as the messenger of God. At the same time one has to concede that individual Muslims often respect practising Christians and some of the values contained in their religion more than Islamic theology would allow them to do.

Islam's Superiority over Christianity / the Christian West

Muslims view Christianity as an offshoot of Islam which, in turn, is regarded as the universal religion of mankind. Hence, Islam has been in existence since Adam and will endure as the only religion till the end of time. Christians will not find mercy before God's judgement seat since they have fallen into grave doctrinal errors. The Quran repeatedly states that Christians who "disbelieve" will go to hell:

> "Those who disbelieve among the People of the Book and the Polytheists, will be thrown in hellfire, to dwell therein. They are the worst of creatures" (98:6).

It can be assumed that the phrase "those who disbelieve among the People of the Book" refers to Christians who rejected Muhammad's prophethood and Islamic monotheism.

Many Muslims of today claim that Christians not only err in their belief, however. The rapid moral decline of the West, accompanied by alcoholism, prostitution, homosexuality, the existence of old-peoples homes, unmarried couples living together, drugs and wasteful consumption, all seem to underline the belief that Islam holds a valid alternative. Support for this view is taken from the Quran (3:110) which confirms that "you are the best of peoples that evolved for mankind, commanding what is right and forbidding what is wrong". The moral decline of the West "proves" Islam to be true and superior, as many contemporary Muslim scholars and writers claim. Islam, they argue, has all the answers to cure the ills of western society. Only turning to Islam will bring healing and stability. – It goes without saying that weaknesses and problems of the Muslim world are not discussed at the same time. Or if they are mentioned at all not very few Muslim writers hold that any weakness in the Muslim world (like unemployment, lack of infrastructure, schooling, jobs, adequate housing etc.) are due to Western imperialism and the desire of the West to destroy the Muslim world and Islam.

Christianity as Viewed by Selected Muslim Scholars

In writings of Muslim scholars about Christianity one finds surprisingly few affirmative statements, many are rather disapproving and derogative. In their studies, contemporary writers frequently refer back to Muslim apologetic literature that emerged during Islam's medieval period.

1. Muhammad Rashid Rida (1865–1935)

Muhammad Rashid Rida is regarded as one of the most influential Muslim scholars at the turn of the last century. Unlike his mentor, the renowned Egyptian reformer Muhammad Abduh, Rida vehemently opposed Christianity. In addition to being a Mufti (giving Islamic legal opinions) Rida published the renowned Quranic commentary al-Manar, which he compiled from notes and expositions by his former teacher. [1]

In his writings Rashid Rida addresses the question of the reliability of the Christian scriptures, which he regarded as a combination of myths, legend and history that have become interwoven with the message of God (Ayoub 1984:58).

In his assault on the Christian revelation, Rida readily employs Biblical historical criticism, first developed by Christian theologians in the West, and applied to 19th century Islamic apologetics. In order to demonstrate the absurdity of the Christian religion, Rida studied the works of European theologians, philosophers and writers. Many of them published their works in order to undermine and destroy the Christian faith in Europe.

2. Muhammad Muhammad Abu Zahra (1898–1974)

The late Muhammad Abu Zahra must be regarded as one of most influential personalities among Muslim scholars and apologist of the 20th century. In addition to his post as professor for Religious Studies at the al-Azhar, he lectured at the University of Cairo's Faculty of Law. He wrote about the reliability of the Christian scriptures.

It was in 1942 that Abu Zahra first began a series of "lectures about Christianity. Like Rashid Rida before him, Abu Zahra expresses outright opposition to Christianity in his writings. Abu Zahra applies methods of historical criticism that had emerged earlier from Europe's theological and philosophical literature.

As a starting point, Abu Zahra He argues, that initial Christianity, as taught by Jesus Christ himself, was in perfect harmony with Islam. However, due to the later corruption of the Biblical text, this ideal Christianity can no longer be found in the Christian scriptures but has to be sought in the Quran (Zahra, p. 166). For Abu Zahra, the Trinity, which caused a major split in the Christian church, is not part of this initial Christian teaching but was introduced only as a result of the Philosophical School in Alexandria (Zahra p. 103–110 & 129ff).

Abu Zahra's also goes on to include the contemporary Christian faith. In the 3rd edition of his lectures he denies attacking the Christian religion, stressing that it is his intention to 'merely present scientific fact' (Goddard 1996:61). What is conveyed, however, is the Islamic reading vis-à-vis the corruption of the Christian text, presented here as the result of scientific research. The possibility that a different set of assumptions or approaches could produce different results is not considered: Islam and religion can only be viewed from an Islamic perspective. Abu Zahra only knew Arabic, therefore his judgement of Christianity is based entirely on apologetic literature available in his mother tongue. Not surprisingly, his description follows the accepted Muslim reading of the Biblical texts. The Christian faith is denied self-representation (Goddard 1996:83f).

3. Ahmad Shalabi (1921–)

The Egyptian Ahmad Shalabi graduated from the University of Cambridge with a PhD in history. As a religious scholar he published the treatise 'A Comparison of Religions' (muqaranat al-adyan) where he discusses Christianity, and especially the themes of trinity, crucifixion, and redemption.

The Christian religion, according to Shalabi, is a combination of the Apostle Paul's personal opinions coupled with pagan elements which he introduced into Christianity (Shalabi, pp. 130–140; Ayoub 1984:64).

Shalabi argues that the accounts of Jesus' birth, temptation and resurrection, as found in the four gospels, have been influenced by Buddhist legends and stories about pagan gods in India and the Middle East (Shalabi, p. 25ff; Ayoub 1984:62).

One could easily find more literature of the like. In most cases Muslim theologians of the 19th and 20th century are more negative towards Christians and the Christian faith and scriptures than former ones. But on the other side, the average Muslim who never earned a degree in Muslim theology will not have any concrete knowledge of apologetical literature in most cases.

Core Arguments in Islamic Apologetics Against Christianity today

Christianity has been corrupted during the course of its history. The biblical prophecies point to Muhammad, therefore he is the messenger of God for Christians too. Christianity has been allied with western imperialism to subdue the Islamic world and subvert the Muslim faith (Goddard 1996:93).

Overall, the arguments presented are those of the medieval Muslim writers with the exception that, by incorporating modern methods of historical criticism, they are slightly modified to suit the modern context. In all these writings a failure to consult reliable primary sources (like the Bible in itself) is evident. As Hugh Goddard (1996:94) correctly remarks,

> "the primary intent of these authors is in no way to understand Christianity. The intent is to buttress traditional Islamic belief or to rebut western influence politically, socially and intellectually. Any 'comparative religion' is designed to assert the superiority of Islam."

It appears that Islamic statements about Christian-Muslim relations serve one purpose mainly, the reassertion of the Muslin faith. While some publications are widely accessible, the existence of many others is only known about as they do not enter the public sphere. Some of these "internal notes", and especially if they are written in the local language, are more disapproving of Christianity than those meant for a wider circulation.

In general, contemporary treatises about Christianity do not diverge from the basic teaching of the Quran. There seems to be a variety of arguments brought forward against Christianity/the West under three or four headings:

1. Theology
2. Morality
3. Culture

Theology: When it comes to theology, some Muslim magazines and journals which are published for Muslim readers in the West discuss questions like "shirk" (idolatry) and more or less openly declare Christians to venerate three gods or label them as "kafir" (unbelievers) alongside with atheists (Huda 1/01, 3; Muslimischer Studentenverein Karlsruhe e.V., 1999:20). Christians err in their belief in the trinity and Jesus' sonship, in his death on the cross, which is an abomination to Islam and rejected outrightly.

Other Muslim scholars openly call for an end to Christian mission as a prerogative for genuine dialogue, peace and understanding. From their perspective only Islam has the right to proselytise. While Christians are tolerated in countries where Muslims are in the majority, they do not have the right to expand or propagate their religion. "Equal rights" to proclaim faith for Muslims as well as for Christians does not sound acceptable to many Muslims even in a country which is not totally Muslim.

Morality: Other articles reflect the moral concerns of many Muslims living in a non-Muslim society. They characterize Western society as such as a "Zina-society", that has become obsessed by fornication and adultery (al-Islam, 1/01, 4–8). Fears to be defiled arise, since adultery, according to the Quran, is one of the gravest sins a man or women can commit. In Islamic jurisprudence it merits the fixed hadd (death) penalty i.e. a an unalterable punishment prescribed by canon law, which is considered a 'right of God' (haqq Allah). The overall decline of morality and the break-up of the family make many Muslims feel insecure.

Culture: When it comes to culture, there are also many problems for devout Muslims: Islam prohibits the consumption of alcohol, blood, carrion, as well as pork and products derived from it. Muslims are concerned that such unlawful substances or traces of such, possibly undeclared, could have entered the food chain or be found in medical drugs. Any contact with such unlawful substances ritually defiles a Muslim, his worshipping is invalid. A person in a state of ritual impurity may not touch the Quran or pray. And finally, there are the important issues of marriage, divorce, the ritual slaughter of animals, the right to Islamic holidays and the separation of boys and girls during physical education which is not observed in the West.

Summary

Quran and Islamic Tradition present a multi-faceted picture of Christians, Christianity and the Christian revelation. Initially, at the start of Muhammad's mission in AD 610, acceptance rather then rejection characterised Muslim attitudes towards Christianity. Christians are viewed as "People of the Book" (ahl al-kitab), commended for their religious devotion (Sura 5:82), and approved of for their faith in one God and creator . This apparent acceptance is closely linked with the hope which Muhammad cherished earlier, that Jews and Christians would believe in his divine mission. Only after he learned that both Jews and Christians rejected his claim to prophethood, with Christians holding on to the Trinity of God, Jesus' sonship and his crucifixion, did Muhammad withdraw his earlier support. Thereafter he reasoned that they had deviated from their original revelation and fallen into grave error (2:116; 5:72–73; 4:157–158). This subsequent period is marked by an increase of Quranic utterances, which clearly distance and separate Islam from Christianity, warn Muslims against having close links with Christians, and even condemn them for their disbelief (98:6).

Therefore, Muslim-Christian relations are characterised by an overall ambivalence. Muhammad's own shifting positions vis-à-vis Christianity which is reflected in the Quran, is how many Muslims feel: Indeed, on the one hand there are many Muslims who appreciate

the faith, moral principles and family values of practising Christians. They also see similarities in that both religions hold (prophets including Adam, Abraham, Moses, Mary and Jesus). However, on the other hand there remain what appears to be insurmountable barriers – trinity, sonship, crucifixion, and the consequent accusation that Christians are idolaters.

In spite of the sympathies Muslims have for the 'People of the Book' and their faith, the dominant voices of Islamic scholarship suggest distancing, disapproval and denial. This is even more fuelled by cultural and moral issues. Devout Muslims who may be members of a Muslim organisation or even be politically active may have more negative feelings towards Christians and distance themselves from Christians or even tell them openly their dislike. The less they know about apologetics, Muslim theology and arguments against the Bible the easier conversation may be.

References

- Ayoub M. (1984) Muslim Views of Christianity. Islamochristiana (Rom) 10, 49–70.
- Goddard, H. (1996) Muslim Perceptions of Christianity. Grey Seal, London.
- Huda – Die Rechtleitung, 1/01.
- Kerr, M.(1966) Islamic Reform. The Political and Legal Theoriesof Muhammad 'Abduh and Rashid Rida. Berkeley.
- Khoury, A. T. & Hagemann, L. (1986) Christentum und Christen im Denken zeitgenössiger Muslime. CIS-Verlag, Altenberge.
- Mühlbauer, A. (2001) Die Zina-Gesellschaft – eine Betrachtung zu Sure 17:32. al-Islam 1/2001.
- Muslimischer Studentenverein Karlsruhe e.V. (ed.) (1999) Einführung in das Verhältnis von
- Muslimen und Nichtmuslimen. Grundsätze – Geschichte – Muslime im Westen.
- Shalabi, A. (1960/2) mqaranat al-adyan. al-Qahira.
- Zahra A. (1966/3) muhadarat fi-n nasraniya. al-Qahira.

1.   Malcolm Kerr. Islamic Reform. The Political and Legal Theoriesof Muhammad 'Abduh and Rashid Rida. Berkeley, 1966. ↵