



# Bible and Qur'an in Dialogue

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## Introduction

Dialogue with Islam will always be dialogue with one (or several) among other possible understandings of Islam. Belief in the Qur'an as the revealed Word of God, in Muhammad as the seal of the prophets and the "good example" (Sura 33:21) of a God-pleasing life, in addition to the acceptance of a few basic religious practices as prescribed by God are common to all Muslims. However, the Muslim world, and certainly the Sunni section of it, does not know of any kind of *magisterium* that would or could claim to teach authoritatively the authentic interpretation of Qur'an and Sunna and would meet with wide acceptance among the Muslims. The various understandings of Islam follow from different ways of "reading" its normative texts (esp. the Qur'an) and of interpreting its central founding events and symbols. I shall limit myself here to mainstream Sunni understanding of Islam as we find it taught and practised e.g. in Al-Azhar University in Cairo and those innumerable institutions that are close to its teaching. Furthermore, I shall limit myself here to a few remarks that seem to be of immediate relevance to Christian-Muslim dialogue: (1) The "Word of God" in Christian and in Muslim understanding; (2) Muslim beliefs concerning the Qur'an and the Bible and their relevance for the encounter between Christians and Muslims; (3) The Bible and the Qur'an in their spiritual significance for Christians and Muslims; (4) Initiatives in studying the Bible and the Qur'an together.

## 1. The "Word of God" in Christian and in Muslim understanding

Following closely the *Guidelines for Dialogue between Christians and Muslims*<sup>1</sup> we can say: Both Christians and Muslims believe that God took the initiative in history to speak to human beings. Believers in both religions consider themselves the fortunate beneficiaries

of the "gift of the Word." To Muslims the Qur'an is the final, unique and fully authentic manifestation of the Word of God, addressed to humankind through the ministry of Muhammad (cf. e.g. Sura 42:52). And from their side, Christians are persuaded that "in many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days He has spoken to us by a Son, whom He appointed the heir of all things" (Heb 1:1-2).

In the effort to clarify to each other the ways in which the Christian and the Muslim religion receive and understand the Word of God, Christians and Muslims will point out the different ways in which the two religions identify the Word addressed to them by God. For Muslims this Word is the Qur'an itself, "... a revelation of the Lord of the Worlds ..." in plain Arabic speech (Sura 26:192, 195), and mention will be made of the Qur'an's importance for them as discourse about God and as a law for humankind. According to the Christian view, the Word of God came into the world "in the fullness of time" (cf. Mk 1:15) not in the form of a Scripture, but in the person of Jesus Christ, revelation of the Father and presence of God in the world of human beings. For Christians "Sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the Word of God, [which is] committed to the Church" (DV 10), "for there exists a close connection and communication between sacred tradition and sacred Scripture ... both of them flowing from the same divine wellspring" (DV 9). Consequently, according to Christian teaching the holy books of the Old and the New Testament, jointly the work of God and the divinely inspired authors, are only one means, albeit an exceptional and normative means, of coming to know the Word of God in life's experience.

For a dialogue to be authentic, the *Guidelines* emphasize, the partners must take account of the profound difference in the faith convictions of Muslims and Christians regarding the nature and message of their respective Holy Scripture so as to avoid useless confusion and irrelevant criticism. In the Muslims' religious experience, the Word of God became "the Book, wherein is no doubt" (Sura 2:2), "the Book with the truth" (Sura 5:48 et al), "the Book making clear everything" (Sura 16:89), namely the Qur'an, whereas Christians believe that the Word of God "became flesh" in the person of Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Lord.



## 2. Muslim beliefs concerning the Qur'an and the Bible and their relevance for the encounter between Christians and Muslims

### 2.1 The Qur'an and Christian-Muslim dialogue

From the many passages of the Qur'an that speak about the Christians and about relations with them, we take into account here only verses from suras five and nine. These suras are considered to belong to the last phase of Qur'anic revelation. Thus, Muslim faith holds them to be "the last word" of the Qur'an on the subject, overriding or correcting possibly conflicting earlier relevant statements of the Book.

Christians, together with the Jews, are called by the Qur'an "People of the Book" and at times "People of the Gospel" (e.g. Sura 5:47). Thus, in a sense, the Qur'an challenges Christian believers to re-examine their behaviour and practices in the light of the Gospel. Behind the frequent single explicit or implicit question from Muslims to Christians as to why they do not conform to clear prescriptions of the Torah (e.g. circumcision or dietary prescriptions) stands the real question: "How do you obey the Word of God?" A single scriptural quotation made to a Christian by a Muslim interlocutor may well seem too narrow a criterion, and in fact it is. But in dialogue Christians must answer the real question that is being asked of them and answer it in such a way as to be understood by the Muslim. Furthermore, it may not be entirely useless for Christians to realise that this or that of their practices does in fact stand in tension with, if not in flat contradiction to, biblical teaching.

For the Muslim in any case there is no doubt that he/she must judge everything according to the teaching of the Qur'an. He/she does not see the need to read the Bible; the Qur'an, according to Muslim belief, has come as the last Word of God. It has been preserved authentically and thus confirms or cancels whatever came before (e.g. Sura 5:48: "And unto thee have We revealed the Scripture with the truth, confirming whatever Scripture was before it, and a watcher over it. So judge between them by that which Allah hath revealed, and follow not their desires away from the truth that has come unto thee ..."). The Christian may follow his/her conscience and obey the Word of God as he/she sees it. However, the Muslim will consider everything in the Bible which is not in agreement with the Qur'an as either obsolete or falsified.

We should take note of the view of the Qur'an expressed in the same verse 5:48, that in religion pluralism is a fact, that this fact is to last till the end of the world and that the presence of other religions existing side by side with Islam will be a test willed by God to

try the fidelity of the Muslims ("For each We have appointed a divine law and a traced-out way. Had Allah willed He could have made you one community. But that He may try you by that which He hath given you (He hath made you as you are). So vie with one another in good works. Unto Allah ye will all return, and He will then inform you of that wherein ye differ.").

We find in Sura 5:82 the famous passage where in one and the same verse Jews and idolaters are described as "the most vehement of mankind in hostility to those who believe" and, on the other hand, "those who say: Lo! We are Christians" to be "the nearest to them in affection", and the verse adds: "That is because there are among them priests and monks and because they are not proud." The following verse makes it clear that Christians are expected to have, besides the qualities of love and humility, a warm sense of God's overwhelming greatness. Now, the text in question here may well have been referring to a group of Christians who were more favourable to Islam. However that may be, this passage forms part of the text of the Qur'an and therefore it is accepted by Muslims as the Word of God.

Besides such texts we find other restrictive ones, which certainly are not likely to encourage dialogue. Take for instance: "O ye who believe! Take not the Jews and Christians for friends" (Sura 5:51) and the famous call to fight the Christians and to reduce them to a subordinate political status under Islamic rule (Sura 9:29). Although this verse clearly distinguishes between some "People of the Book" who believe in God and some others who don't, that distinction has not been made in practice, and the verse has been applied in the past to all Christians as such.

From the overall evidence as to Qur'anic verses concerning the Christians and relations with them, J.-M. Gaudeul concludes:

*It seems possible to find in the Qur'an texts that could lead Muslims to accept fruitful dialogue with Christians. Of course, it is not up to us to tell Muslims how they should understand the Qur'an, this is their affair. But what we could do is to lay aside our fears, and approach Muslims as we are expected to, not only in the Gospel, but even on the part of verses in the Qur'an.<sup>2</sup>*

Gaudeul is convinced that if Christians show themselves to be really and truly the "People of the Book", that is, a People obedient to the Word of God, with a deep sense of God's majesty, then there can be no doubt that this attitude will be used by God to remind the Muslims of the texts more favourable to Christians. This, in turn, may facilitate a meeting between Christians and Muslims as partners and not as rivals or adversaries engaged in fruitless controversies.



## 2.2 Some salient differences between the Christian and Muslim faiths concerning Scripture

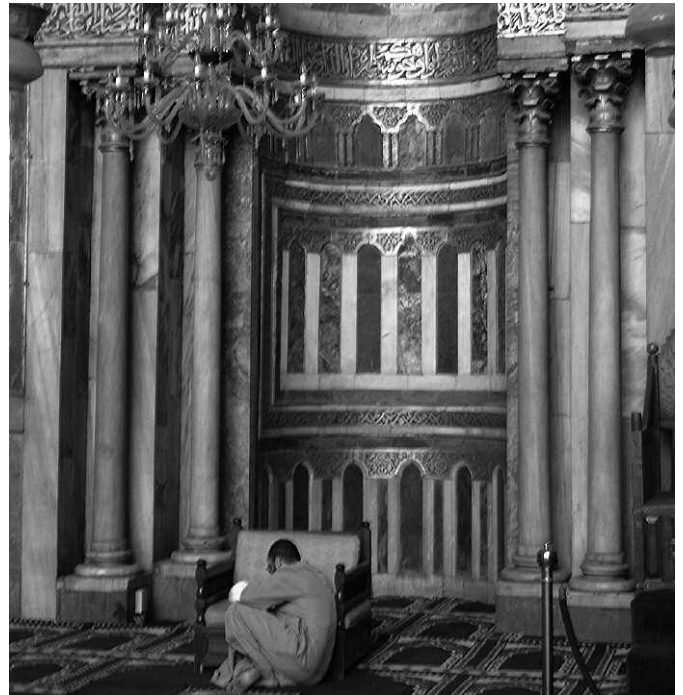
Christian teaching on the inspiration of the biblical scriptures implies the affirmation that God took human beings, individually and as groups, as his instruments in such a way that He respected their freedom, their mental processes, temperaments, faculties, traditions. The given biblical text for Christian belief is always at the same time entirely the word of the writer and the Word of God. Thus the Word of God in the Bible comes to the listener or reader with different styles, images, and expressions, in which they recognize the person or group(s) of persons who formulated and gave shape to the given text. In contrast, according to mainstream Muslim faith, the Word of God came to Muhammad by way of dictation: God, or His Spirit (= the angel Jibril) tells Muhammad, word for word, what he has to say; Muhammad is the mouthpiece of God in the sense that in no way does he share in the choice of words, sentences and so forth, that he is ordered to pronounce.

Muslims never quote the Qur'an by saying: "Muhammad says this ..." but by announcing purely and simply: "God says ..." The way in which modern Christians, when quoting the Bible, mention only the human instrument: "Isaiah teaches", "Moses says", tends to mislead the Muslims into thinking that by so doing Christians want to deny that these texts come from God. One may well ask with Jean-Marie Gaudeul,<sup>3</sup> whether, when quoting from the Bible, it would not be more adequate for Christian believers – especially in dialogue with Muslims – to use phrases that express our belief in God's guidance and inspiration, formulae as we find them in the Bible itself: "The Holy Spirit speaking through David or through Paul, says" (Mk 12:36) or simply: "It is written in the Scriptures" (cf. Ga 4:27).

The Muslim belief in revelation as dictation of a text leads to another consequence. While both the Bible and the Qur'an contain a great number of literary forms, the Qur'an presents the totality of its text as one overarching literary genre: the "prophetic". The various Qur'anic forms of style or subject matter (prayers, rules, exhortations, stories etc.) are fitted into this overall frame of the "prophetic". The Qur'an as a whole rightly can be viewed a kind of one, long sermon or exhortation: spoken by God (or by angels) and addressed to Muhammad or to believers or to humans in general.

From the conviction that the Qur'an is direct dictation from God the Muslim will conclude that the Qur'an is absolutely perfect, divine as to content and style. The beauty of the Arabic style of the Qur'an and the clarity of the content of its message (with its focus: unity of God and brotherhood of humankind) will be perceived as,

and believed to be, a miracle of ultimately irresistible convincing power.



A further, major difference in the content of the Bible and the Qur'an is such as to lead Christians and Muslims in quite different directions. If we were to summarize the message of the Bible in a few lines, we would say: God reveals Himself in the course of one history of salvation. This history is essentially characterized by the election of a specific people, the promise of the Messiah and then the covenant with this people. This people however turns out unfaithful, is punished yet not rejected, is led through divine pedagogy to a higher and higher idea of God and, simultaneously, to a deeper sense of sin and to a greater expectation of messianic promises. Then in the faith of the Christian Church, the new Israel with its body of Scripture, eventually named "the New Testament", the "mysterious" plan of God, perceived to have been hidden from the beginning, is believed to have been revealed through the Son, Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus is the focus of all history, who dies, who saves humankind by His death and resurrection, and gives those who believe in Him a share in His glory through His Spirit so that they may prepare for the second coming. It is one plan, unfolding from the beginning to the end of time, and strictly centred on Jesus, "the Messiah (Christ)", in whom God enters our history and takes history in His own life.

In Islam there is no such history of salvation, understood as progress in the revelation of God's mystery leading to incarnation, the cross, resurrection and the sending of the Holy Spirit. The Muslim faith views the relationship of God to humankind quite differently:



- Periodically God sends prophets to remind humans of the one unchangeable religion: a religion based on human nature into which God has created an orientation towards monotheism. The message of this innate religion is always the same: God is unique. Worship Him only. Keep social justice. Believe in the last day.
- These prophets are sent in different places and at different times to different communities, and these are not connected with each other. Instead of one continuous history of God with his people and through them with all humankind, in the Qur'anic vision we have rather the juxtaposition of separate interventions of God.
- In each of these interventions, the same process is repeated: the prophet preaches; the people rebel against his message; God destroys this community but saves his messenger. The punishment motive in the stories of the Old Testament concerning Noah and the Flood, Loth and Sodom, Moses and the Egyptians, Jonah and Nineveh is taken up by the Qur'an. These stories prefigure Muhammad's own experience.
- Finally, when humankind has come of age, Muhammad is sent by God, as the last, decisive prophet, to preach this same, one message of all genuine prophets, but now with insuperable clarity and through the victorious *umma muslima*, the community of Muslims, eventually, to the whole of humankind. From Muhammad, the final prophet, onwards the Muslim community is charged not only with making Islam as ideal faith and practice known but to struggle for the eventual rule of God by way of Islam and the divine law, in all places and in all spheres of life.

### 2.3 The Muslim view of the Bible

What has been stated concerning the Qur'an and its vision of history conditions the Muslim's encounter with the Bible.

The first reaction of a Muslim to being exposed to the Bible will be a reaction of estrangement und bewilderment. Being used to the literary style of the Qur'an, he or she is faced in the Bible with a whole library of different writings belonging to different epochs and cultures, with different styles and different subject matters.

The Muslim will have been taught by the Qur'an, catechism and Muslim preaching that the book of the Torah was given to Moses, the book of the Psalms to David and the Gospel to Jesus. He/she will find it difficult to identify the Torah with the five different books of the Pentateuch. Then he/she will discover that the Psalms are not words attributed to God, but are throughout prayers addressed to God.

In the light of this, normally Muslims all over the world tend to feel confirmed in the belief that the Bible has been falsified by the Jews and Christians. Already in the Qur'an, the "People of the Book" are accused of forging new texts and/or changing words in the Bible. Since, as we have stated, the Qur'an and thus Islam do not consider the possibility of a proper history of salvation in the sense of a history implying a steady progress of revelation leading to a point of irreversible culmination, the Muslim looking at the Bible will tend to reason as follows:

"Look at the Torah: If this book, as it stands, has been revealed by God, how is it possible that we find in it no mention of essential truths such as the resurrection of the dead, or the existence of heaven and hell? Any truly revealed book should contain these essentials. If the Torah does not teach them, it is because the Jews have suppressed all the passages containing these truths. And in any case: the real Torah was given by God to Moses himself; how could the book contain an account of Moses' death? It is because the Jews added texts of their own making to the Word of God."

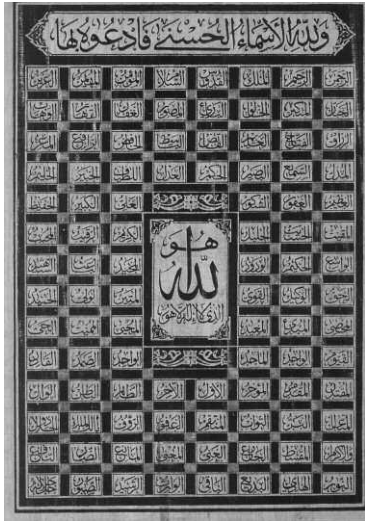
It is important for Christians to realize that such accusations follow logically, if one takes for granted that revelation comes down ready-made from heaven through dictation. Hence, for instance, the question becomes understandable that was put to me recently by a Muslim reader of my homepage ([www.answers-to-muslims.com](http://www.answers-to-muslims.com)): "If present-day Christianity is authentic, how can there be different Gospels?" The Muslim wonders, what happened to the unique Gospel, the *injil*, revealed word by word by God to "Isa, son of Mary". In the New Testament the Muslim finds in place of this one *injil* (Gospel) four different ones. And these "Gospels" turn out to be simply a collection of traditions concerning Jesus, put together by his disciples, some of whom never even met Jesus personally. Furthermore, the "gospels" show clearly that they derive from human hands only, for they are full of discrepancies and contradictions among each other. Finally, the Qur'an states (and for the Muslim this means: "God Himself states") clearly, that Jesus never claimed to be more than a prophet, that he did not die on the cross and that he announced explicitly the coming of Muhammad.

Why can't we find in the New Testament of the Christians a clear foretelling of Muhammad? The Muslim answer is: because the Christians removed it from the text. In consequence, we are left, in the Muslims' view, with only a few traces of this foretelling of Muhammad in the Bible, as for instance in Deuteronomy 18:18, in which God promises to the Israelites that he will raise up from their brothers a prophet like Moses and in the Gospel according to John (14:26), which contains the promise of the paraclete or comforter. Whereas the Christians understand this foretelling of the coming of



the paraclete as referring to the Holy Spirit, Muslims read *periklutos* (famous, praiseworthy) for *parakletos* and claim that there is promised Muhammad, whose name is “praised”.<sup>4</sup>

Christians should not be discouraged to discover that they are accused of having falsified the Bible. These objections and accusations are not meant personally. However, they should use all possible means provided to them by modern scholarship and communication media, not least the electronic ones, to make educated Muslims aware of how untenable the Islamic doctrine of the “corruption” of the Bible in its traditional understanding is in fact.



*The 99 names of God*

Not surprisingly, some Muslim scholars, past and present, have accepted the text of the Bible as it stands today. They suggest that the falsification, of which the Qur’an speaks, refers to the misguided interpretation of the text by Jews and Christians from earliest times rather than to alteration of the actual text. Other contemporary Muslim scholars recognise that the Gospels are based on knowledge of historical events, but add that the Christian interpretation of these events need not exclude other (e.g. Muslim) interpretations.<sup>5</sup>

### 3. The Bible and the Qur’an in their spiritual significance for Christians and Muslims<sup>6</sup>

#### 3.1 Getting to know our Holy Scriptures and what they mean to us as believers – an inevitable task for both Christians and Muslims today

Contemporary living together (*convivencia*) between Christian and Muslim believers in various constellations and worldwide has become a fact. Many Christians and many Muslims are convinced that it is part of their vocation to get to know one another and to promote, wherever possible together, what is good and to ward off what is evil. From the point of view of Muslim believers, simply to disregard the other “books” would amount to disobeying the message of the Qur’an. Even Muslims who believe that “the People of the Book” have falsified the text of their respective Holy Scriptures and who may be interested in Jews and Christians only as potential

converts to Islam, will increasingly become aware of the “need” of learning from Christians about their own understanding of their Holy Scriptures. The positive statements of the Qur’an about the “People of the Book” which certainly, as we have seen, go together with negative ones, all the same have to be taken seriously by the Muslims, if they take the Qur’an at all seriously.

*Of the People of the Scripture there is a staunch community who recite the revelations of Allah in the night season, falling prostrate (before Him). They believe in Allah and the Last Day, and enjoin right conduct and forbid indecency, and vie with one another in good works. They are of the righteous. And whatever good they do, they will not be denied the meed thereof. Allah is Aware of those who ward off (evil) (Sura 3:113-115).*

But extra-Islamic considerations, too, will lead Muslims to come to see more and more that they cannot avoid taking the Bible seriously and getting to know it properly, just as non-Muslims in our day will want to acquaint themselves with the text of the Qur’an itself. Inevitably, in modern societies, Muslims will meet with a critical approach to spiritually relevant texts, an approach that they had not been acquainted with hitherto. In a first reaction to modern and critical Bible scholarship Muslims may well have somewhat triumphantly proclaimed that such critical scholarship goes to confirm traditional Muslim claims to textual falsification of the Bible. However, eventually they will come to ask themselves why the historical-critical approach to Bible studies, instead of leading simply to the end of Christian faith, in fact has on the whole turned out to be a factor promoting meaningful interpretation of the Christian faith for today. In this sense historical-critical exegesis no doubt has led to recognizing in a new way the spiritual and theological relevance of the Scriptures.

In Christian circles, too, a new impetus can be made out towards looking out for the Qur’an. Thoughtful Christians ask themselves how it is possible that the Qur’an in our day continues to convey considerable spiritual energy. Muslims seem to receive today, as in the past, spiritual energy in the Qur’an. It is not so much the Muslim claim of the corruption of the Bible that challenges Christians, but rather the fact that a book like the Qur’an, which entered history about six hundred years after the birth of Christ, continues to nourish a vibrant world faith with more than one billion adherents. What does it mean, these Christians may well wonder, that the God of Jesus Christ has allowed or even caused this to happen?

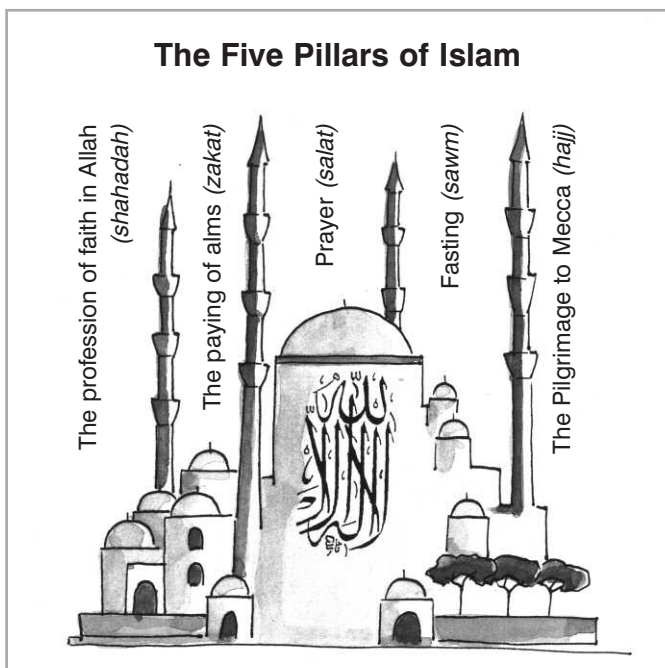
#### 3.2 Spiritual growth and cleansing through mutual attention to our Holy Scriptures

However difficult it may seem to relate the Bible and the Qur’an in their spiritual relevance to one another, the task would seem to be inevitable, except if one were to wilfully decide to shut oneself off from another spiritual-



ly. Christians and Muslims can at least to some extent convey to one another what constitutes their inner basic attitude, what is religiously relevant to them and from which spiritual perspective they try to lead their lives. It is true that the Bible and the Qur'an are for Christians and Muslims no more than one possible focal point among many others, yet they certainly constitute a central focal point for the faith of those who put their faith into them. What relevance does it have for Muslims to become aware of the spiritual relevance which the Bible has for each Christian and for the Christian Church? What do Christians learn when they come to realise how the lives of individual Muslims and, in a sense, of the whole *umma muslima* are shaped with and through the Qur'an?

Biblical texts constitute a polyphonic response to the encounter with "God's wonderful works", the *magnalia Dei*. The Word, which is God himself in Jesus Christ, continues to find ever new responses, and these responses turn into words of witness, of proclamation and of good news. The Christian lives in the grateful realisation that the ever greater God wishes to meet him/her in Jesus of Nazareth, crucified and risen, who shares his life with us at the "table of the Bread" and the "table of His Word".



In contrast, Muslim understanding of faith does not seem to conceive the Qur'an as a response on the part of the prophet Muhammad or any other witness of faith. Rather, the Qur'an for the Muslim believer is nothing less than the text of the Word of God, existing from eternity, preserved in heaven, written on the well-guarded tablet (Sura 85:22). This text was conveyed to Muhammad and delivered by him absolutely faithfully to his listeners, who preserved it integrally by memory and even-

tually in written words as well. The believer is asked to respond to the creator's and judge's revealed guidance by the faithful practice of the "five pillars" of Islam. From the Qur'an's injunctions the law can be deduced as clear orientation for the individual and the community. If the Qur'an can be an object of mystical love and a sacrament-like source of energy, yet, in the first place and primarily, it is guidance as the clear expression of the will of the merciful God.

#### 4. Initiatives in studying the Bible and the Qur'an together

Recently, on behalf of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rev. Michael Ipgrave organized a pioneering Christian-Muslim seminar at Doha that was hosted by the Emir of the State of Qatar. The volume "Scriptures in Dialogue" presents the proceedings of that seminar, the major part of which consisted of the work carried out in four parallel small groups, each composed of Christian and Muslim scholars. These groups met on a total of six occasions for intensive reading of paired passages from the Qur'an and the Bible. In a postscript Ipgrave writes:

*Christianity and Islam both have long traditions of scriptural understanding, and many ways of developing these traditions further to meet new situations and questions. But there are almost no places and occasions where Christians and Muslims can learn from each other and engage in dialogue around the scriptures together ... Any progress towards deeper understanding and peacemaking between the two faiths must, therefore, take these scriptures seriously, because they are linked to the best and the worst in history and the current situation.<sup>8</sup>*

Small groups of educated Christians and Muslims, for some time now, come together regularly here and there to read biblical and Qur'anic texts together. Such study groups are a hopeful sign. Already by the mid-1980s, Fr. Jacques Jomier published most helpful materials for such study circles. Inspired by Jomier's initiatives and publications over the past years, groups of religiously educated Jews, Muslims and Christians have met regularly in Berlin and now in Frankfurt to read together Qur'anic and related biblical texts. Each side tries by way of this shared reading of, and response to, the texts to grow in appreciating the reasons for which biblical and Qur'anic texts continue to fascinate and inspire those who listen to them or read them with open hearts. Does the probability that such shared spiritual reading will remain a matter of relatively small numbers detract from its intrinsic value?

Simultaneously, Christians should do everything possible to invite young Muslim scholars to participate in biblical study and scholarship, and vice versa. For genuine theological Christian-Muslim dialogue to succeed, Muslim "christianologists" and Bible exegetes would seem to be needed. The teaching and writing of such



scholars and the scholarly dialogue between them and their Christian (and of course also Jewish) counterparts definitely would help to elaborate and better understand the distinctive contours of the two religions and their respective bodies of religious scholarship.

In this context the unique, long-range project of the Muslim-Christian Research Group GRIC (Groupe de Recherches Islamo-Chrétien)<sup>9</sup> merits special mention. Here Muslim and Christian scholars from Europe and North Africa meet on a regular basis in a number of local groups for research and discussion – as independent and individual representatives of their faith traditions and as friends with neither a political nor religious agenda. In the year 1987 this group published, in French and in English, the results of their work.

The work involved several stages. First, they defined and described scripture, its role and its meaning, to both Islam and Christianity. They also discussed methods and reasons for reading and studying scripture, its transmission to the individual and the community, and how it is received and responded to. The book concludes with two “assessments”: Islamic scholars commenting on the Bible and Christian scholars on the Qur’an.

In his opening remarks to the Doha seminar just mentioned, the Archbishop of Canterbury explained the rationale of shared study of one’s respective scriptures in the following words:

*Christians are Christians and Muslims are Muslims because they care about truth, and because they believe that truth alone gives life. About the nature of that absolute and life-giving truth, Christians and Muslims are not fully in agreement. Yet they are able to find words in which to explain and explore that disagreement because they also share histories and practices that make parts of their systems of belief mutually recognizable – a story reaching back to God’s creation of the world and God’s call to Abraham; a practice of reading and absorbing scriptures and of shaping a life in response to the Word God speaks to creation. We are here to discover together more about how each community believes it must listen to God, conscious of how very differently we identify and speak of God’s revelation ... Listening to God and listening to one another as nations, cultures and faiths have not always had the priority they so desperately need. So this space for reflection is all the more important; it is both a symbol and an example of this kind of engagement.<sup>10</sup>*

Any Christian who has taken part in such a shared reading of the Bible and the Qur’an or, more generally, in dialogical exchanges between Muslims and Christians on theological themes knows that in such a process, together with the discovery of substantial common elements of faith, he/she also comes to know ever more deeply the equally substantial differences between the two faith visions; differences that in fact permeate all

areas of the two faith visions and theological teachings. Ultimately, they have to do with the singularity of the fundamental fact and absolute centre of Christian faith: Jesus, the son of Israel and the Son of God. Encountering Muslims and their Islam in depth, the Christian believer and theologian constantly lives with questions such as these: Could and should Christians qualify Muhammad theologically as a prophet? Can, or even must, Christians confess that the Qur’an “is bearer of a Word of God”, as Robert Caspar has put it? What status and salvific value should Christian theology ascribe to Islam?

It has not been the aim of this paper to go into these questions which I have discussed elsewhere.<sup>11</sup> However, in conclusion, we should all the same indicate with due brevity our position on this central question. On the one hand, Muhammad and the Qur’an merit the utmost attention on the part of the Christian believer and theologian, since Muhammad and the Scripture which he has proclaimed in the name of God are doubtlessly marked by genuine religious experience and in consequence by religious and ethical teachings that in part must be considered the fruit of the Holy Spirit. At the same time, in the light of the revelation that culminates in Jesus Christ, the claim of the prophet of Islam and of the Qur’an to be the perfect and final revelation, judging and superseding all previous revelations, cannot but meet with rejection on the part of the Christian believer. Moreover, the teaching of the Qur’an displays aspects and teachings that do not meet with the standards Jesus Christ represents and sets and that even contradict the teaching he embodied and proclaimed: self-giving and non-violent offering of self including love of the enemy. In other words, the Qur’an, from the point of view of the Christian faith, is marked by at least a partial rejection of the call of the Gospel to perfection and holiness on the pattern of Jesus, the crucified and risen Lord, and it clearly rejects the Good News of God’s gift of Himself to humankind in Jesus Christ.

For us, reading and studying the Qur’an and sharing some such reading and study with Muslim believers belongs to the larger Christian and theological task of discerning the fruits of the Spirit in the foundational texts as well as in the actual life of the religions and their followers. Christians are called in the Church to live ever more effectively their vocation to be the light, salt and yeast of the world. They do so as participants in the event of universal history, in which cultures and religions are being transformed through a process of learning, as well as critically discerning and mutual “cleansing” memory and heart under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. All are invited to let themselves be taken ever more deeply into the fullness of the triune life of God – who has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ as unconditional love. This is the Good News, the Holy Scriptures that our faith preserves and proclaims. ■



*A detailed bibliography can be requested from the CBF General Secretariat.*

- <sup>1</sup> Maurice Borrmans, *Guidelines for Dialogue between Christians and Muslims*, New York/Mahwah 1990, pp. 104-105.
- <sup>2</sup> Jean-Marie Gaudeul, *Bible and Qur'an*, in: *Encounter. Documents for Muslim-Christian Understanding* (Pontifical Institute of Arabic and Islamic Studies 13), Rome 1975, p. 5.
- <sup>3</sup> Gaudeul, *Bible and Qur'an* (see note 2), p. 7.
- <sup>4</sup> Cf. William Montgomery Watt, *Muslim-Christian Encounters. Perceptions and Misperceptions*, London 1991, pp. 33ff.
- <sup>5</sup> Cf. Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, *Art. Tahrif*, in: *Encyclopédie Islamique X* (2000), 111f.; Christian W. Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan on Matthew 5,17-20*, in: *Islamochristiana*, vol. 3 (1977), pp. 99-105.
- <sup>6</sup> In this part of the paper I follow closely parts of the magisterial essay of Hans-Martin Barth, *Nimm und lies! Die spirituelle Bedeutung von Bibel und Koran*, in: Hans-Martin Barth / Christoph Elsas (ed.), *Hermeneutik in Islam und Christentum. Beiträge zum interreligiösen Dialog*. Rudolf-Otto-Symposion 1996, Hamburg 1997, pp. 9-23.

<sup>7</sup> Archaic: for reward or wage.

- <sup>8</sup> Michael Ipgrave (ed.), *Scriptures in Dialogue. Christians and Muslims studying the Bible and the Qur'an together*, London 2004, p. 144.
- <sup>9</sup> Cf. Groupe de Recherches Islamo-Chretien (eds.), *Ces Écritures qui nous questionnent. La Bible & le Coran*, Paris 1987.
- <sup>10</sup> Ipgrave, *Scriptures in Dialogue* (see note 8), pp. xi-xii.
- <sup>11</sup> Christian W. Troll, *Der Islam im Verständnis der katholischen Theologie. Überblick und neuere Ansätze*, in: Marianne Heimbach-Steins / Heinz-Günther Schöttler / Heimo Ertl (eds.), *Religionen im Dialog. Christentum, Judentum und Islam*, Münster 2003, pp. 51-67 (here 58ff.); Id., *Prüfet alles! Der Dienst der Unterscheidung als unabdingbares Element dialogischer Beziehungen von Christen mit Muslimen*, in: Andreas Renz / Hansjörg Schmid / Jutta Sperber (eds.), *Herausforderung Islam. Anfragen an das christliche Selbstverständnis* (Hohenheimer Protokolle 60), Stuttgart 2003, pp. 69-82.