"A Common Word" in Context

Toward the roots of polemics between Christians and Muslims in Early Islam

["Convengamos en una palabra" en su contexto: hacia las raíces de las polémicas entre cristianos y musulmanes en el islam temprano]

Gordon NICKEL
ACTS Seminaries (British Columbia, Canada)
Gordon.Nickel@twu.ca

Resumen: La tradición interpretativa islámica provee significados para muchos versículos coránicos, que, de lo contrario, parecerían opacos. Un versículo utilizado en la actualidad por algunos para sostener que musulmanes y cristianos poseen interpretaciones teológicas en común, Corán 3,64, fue entendido en la tradición como un reto polémico para los no musulmanes para aceptar el concepto islámico de deidad.

Abstract: The Muslim interpretive tradition provides meanings for many Qur'ānic verses which may otherwise seem opaque. A verse used today by some to argue that Muslims and Christians have theological understandings "in common," Q3.64, was understood in the tradition as a polemical challenge to non-Muslims to accept the Muslim concept of deity.

Palabras clave: Polémica. Cristología. Exégesis coránica. Discurso pacífico.

Key words: Polemic. Christology. Theology. Qur'ānic exegesis. Peaceable discourse.

According to Muslim tradition, the conversation between Islam and those who did not accept its messenger began at a very early stage. The sourcebooks of Islam tell a story of polemical encounter between the messenger and various groups of listeners who hear his recitations. Prophetical traditions known as *ḥadīth* present

the words of various antagonists and the replies of the messenger.[1] The earliest biographies of the messenger and the Muslim histories of the origins of Islam identify particular groups of polytheists in Makka and Jews in Madīna who resisted the recitations and denied their divine provenance.[2] These groups neither acknowledged the prophethood of the messenger nor recognized his authority to speak from God.

The Muslim scripture contains a range of materials which seem to reflect polemical situations. Many passages in the Qur'ān give the reader the impression of entering debates in progress between the claims of Islam and groups of listeners who do not accept those claims.[3] Scholars have made such observations from a close reading of text and context and, as will be shown below, the Muslim interpretive tradition has tended to support these directions. The main Qur'ānic claims seem to be that the reciter of the verses is a true messenger of Allah, and that the words he is reciting are sent down by Allah. The listeners who question or reject the claims appear most often to be Jews or "associators." These adversaries counter that far from being a prophet, the reciter is a poet, a sorcerer or a soothsayer, or that he is mad or possessed by *jinn*. They describe the messenger's recitation as a forgery, as nothing but old stories, or confused dreams. The Qur'ān

---

1 Many such *ḥadīth* can be found, for example, in book 60 of AL-BUKHĀRĪ's collection, *kitāb al-tafsīr*. *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (Cairo: al-ʿArabī, 1955), VI. See Ignaz GOLDZIHER, "Über muhammedanische Polemik gegen Ahl al-kitāb," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* XXXII (1878), pp. 344f.; Martin SCHREINER, "Zur Geschichte der Polemik zwischen Juden und Muhammedanern," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* XLII (1888), pp. 592-596; H. HIRSCHFELD, "Historical and legendary controversies between Mohammad and the Rabbis," *Jewish Quarterly Review* X (1897-8), pp. 100-112; Georges VAJDA, "Juifs et Musulmans selon le Ḥadīṯ," *Journal Asiatique* CCXXIX (1937), pp. 85-109; and G.H.A. JUYNBOLL, "Ḥadīth and the Qur'ān," in Jane Dammen MCAULIFFE (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān* (Leiden: Brill 2002), II, p. 391.

2 IBN ISḤĀQ, *Sīrat al-Nabī*, ed. Muḥammad Muḥīyā al-Dīn ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd (Cairo: Maktabat Muḥammad ʿAlī Ṣabīh wa Awlād, 1963), III, pp. 372-412. Alfred GUILLAUME (trans.), *The Life of Muḥammad* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1955), pp. 247-270. Rudolf SELLHEIM, "Prophet, Caliph und Geschichte: Die Muḥammed-Biographie des Ibn Isḥāq," *Oriens* XVIII-XIX (1965-7), pp. 53-54, 62, 80-82. John WANSBROUGH, *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 11-42.

3 Cf. Kate ZEBIRI, "Polemic and Polemical Language," in J.D. MCAULIFFE (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, IV, p. 114.

replies with affirmations of the messenger's true status.[4] Elsewhere in the Qur'ān, claims are made for the true identity of figures familiar from the Bible. Such passages seem to be responding to claims for these figures made by Jews and Christians.

Scholars often remain tentative about the meaning of any one passage in the Qur'ān because the Qur'ān does not generally supply the setting for the recitation. The style of the Qur'ānic discourse is allusive and elliptical.[5] The Qur'ānic text frequently lacks words or units of information which might otherwise be considered essential to a clear expression of meaning. Muslim scripture gives the impression of being addressed to an audience which could supply missing details to which the text only refers.[6] Even narrative in the Qur'ān is "often unintelligible without exegetical complement."[7] In the case of polemical passages, the reader usually encounters ambiguity about many parts of a sentence, including the identities of the subject and object, and the nature of the dispute.[8]

Because of these uncertainties of meaning, Muslim scholars in the early centuries of Islam attempted to provide a setting for the words of scripture. One common method was to specify the "occasion of revelation" (*sabab al-nuzūl*) for

---

4 Kate ZEBIRI, "Argumentation," in Andrew RIPPIN (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'ān* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), p. 274.

5 John WANSBROUGH, *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 1, 42, 57; IDEM, *Sectarian Milieu*, pp. 24-25.

6 J. WANSBROUGH, *Quranic Studies*, p. 1.

7 J. WANSBROUGH, *Quranic Studies*, p. 131. Wansbrough characterized Muslim scripture as a "torso" needing completion by the *sīra-maghāzī* literature. *Sectarian Milieu*, p. 45. Norman CALDER prefered the image of a Chinese painting, in which the missing details do indeed need to be filled in—but only according to independent structures. "Tafsīr from Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr: Problems in the description of a genre, illustrated with reference to the story of Abraham," in G.R. HAWTING and Abdul-Kader A. SHAREEF (eds.), *Approaches to the Qur'ān* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 115.

8 "[The Qur'ān] almost never mentions by name those who ask, challenge, seek guidance, doubt, or abuse, which is one of the reasons the Qur'ān has been named a 'text without a context.'" Stefan WILD, "The Self-Referentiality of the Qur'ān: Sura 3:7 as an Exegetical Challenge," in J.D. MCAULIFFE, Barry D. WALFISH, and Joseph W. GOERING (eds.), *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 422. Matthias RADSCHEIT, for example, discusses the "anonymity" of the Qur'ān's polemical passages and concludes that not only is it difficult to be sure of the identity of the prophet's opponents, but also of the identity of the prophet. *Die koranische Herausforderung: Die* taḥaddī *Verse im Rahmen der Polemikpassagen des Korans* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz, 1996), pp. 14-23.

each verse.[9] *Sīra* and *maghāzī* literature provided a continuous narrative framework for the recitations, which by Muslim accounts were spoken at many different times within a 23-year period and are not arranged chronologically in the canonical sequence. Both kinds of material were used in commentaries on the Qur'ān, and in fact some of the earliest Muslim commentaries explain meaning chiefly by providing narrative and *tayīn al-mubham*, or identification of the anonymous.

Frequently already in the earliest Muslim biographies of Muḥammad, narrative accounts are offered in an attempt to associate verses of the Qur'ān with particular encounters between various groups and the prophet of Islam. The Muslim portrayals of these encounters specify time and place, and provide names and descriptions of the antagonists, lengthy quotations from the conversations, and many other details. These accounts are also found in many classical Muslim commentaries on the Qur'ān. As a result, many verses of the Qur'ān began to be associated with traditions about their narrative settings. Such verses were not simply understood to have "plain meanings," clear to any listener or reader, but rather were thought to require extra information. This way of approaching the meanings of the Qur'ān through tradition continues for many Muslims around the world today.

One important example of the interplay of scriptural text and narrative setting is the traditional understanding of Q3.64. This verse has come into some notoriety in recent years through its prominent use in a major Muslim invitation to dialogue issued in October 2007. [10] Read on its own, 3.64 appears to reflect polemical

---

[9] Gordon NICKEL and Andrew RIPPIN, "The Qur'ān," in A. RIPPIN (ed.), *The Islamic World* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 149.

[10] The document titled "A Common Word between Us and You," was posted on October 13, 2007 at http://www.acommonword.com/index.php?lang=en&page=option1 by the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought. The text of Q3.64 is featured on pp. 2-3, 13-14, and 15. The document takes its title from a translation of a phrase in this verse. Part of this research on the understanding of 3.64 in the Muslim interpretive tradition was presented in a panel discussion on "A Common Word" at the meetings of the American Academy of Religion in Chicago, November 3, 2008. I would like to thank the many scholars who read an earlier draft of this manuscript and gave good suggestions for improvement, including Juan Pedro Monferrer, Irving Hexham, Harold Netland, Jon Hoover, Alan Guenther, Linda Darwish, Mark Durie, Christine Schirrmacher, Martin Whittingham, Elmer Martens, John Azumah, David Shenk, Janet Epp-Buckingham, Ed Loewen, Marvin Dick, Andy Faust, May Lee Chau, Wagdi Iskandar, Dwight Hutchison, Grant Havers, Warren Larson, Jim Cunningham, Lisa Laine, and Erol Dogan; as well as my partners in the AAR panel, Gerald McDermott, Caner Dagli and Joseph Lumbard.

interaction with a group of listeners who are called to a particular understanding of deity. In its recent use, however, the verse is advanced as an indication that Muslims and Christians share some theological understandings "in common." The text of 3.64 reads: "Say: 'O People of the Scripture! Come to a word that is common between you and us, "We serve only God, and we associate nothing with Him, and we do not take each other as lords to the exclusion of God."' If they turn away, say, 'Bear witness that we surrender.'"[11]

Readings of the verse in the Islamic interpretive tradition tended to understand a polemical context. The 12th-century exegete Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1209/606)[12] wrote that in Q3.64, Allah mentioned three things in particular, "because Christians bring together these three."[13] He explained:

> They worship someone other than Allah, that is the Messiah. They associate others with Him, and that is because they say that Allah is three: Father and Son and Holy Spirit. They have asserted three equal (*sawā'*) and eternal (*qadīm*) divine personalities (*dhawāt*). We say they assert three eternal personalities because they say the hypostasis (*uqnūm*) of the Word armed itself (*tadarra'a*) in the humanity (*nāsūt*) of the Messiah. The hypostasis of the Holy Spirit armed itself in the humanity of Mary. Had these two hypostases not been independent and separate, they could not have separated from the Father and armed themselves in Jesus and Mary. Thus because they asserted three independent divine hypostases, they committed *shirk* (*ashraka*).[14]

Not all Muslim commentators have specified Christians as the audience of this verse, and few have provided the theological detail characteristic of al-Rāzī. As al-Ṭabarī (d. 923/310) wrote repeatedly throughout his great commentary, "the people of interpretation disagree concerning the occasion of revelation of this verse."[15] However, Rāzī's comments, as we shall see, are well within the bounds of the

---

[11] Unless otherwise indicated, English translations from the Qur'ān are those of Alan JONES (trans.), *The Qur'ān* (Gibb Memorial Trust, 2007).

[12] This indicates the year of al-Rāzī's death in both A.D. and A.H. ("Anno Hegirae"—lunar years dated from the *hijra* in 622 A.D.).

[13] Al-Fakhr al-Dīn AL-RĀZĪ, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb, al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 1973), VIII, p. 86.

[14] AL-RĀZĪ, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, VIII, p. 86.

[15] For example, at Q3.64, Abū Ja'far Muḥammad ibn Jarīr AL-ṬABARĪ, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī, Jāmi' al-bayān 'an ta'wīl al-Qur'ān*, ed. Maḥmūd Muḥammad Shākir and Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākir (Cairo, 1955-69, 2nd ed.), VI, p. 322.

classical Muslim interpretive tradition. His treatment of the verse, described more fully below, adds dimensions of rational discourse and theological reflection which lead into some of the most important issues of interfaith encounter.

The context of Q3.64 suggests that the verse reflects a polemical encounter between the speaker and a group of Christians and/or Jews. Traditional Muslim designation of the "occasion of revelation" for 3.64 tended to favour a meeting with a particular group of Christians. Exegesis of the verse by the great scholars of the Muslim interpretive tradition, however, made more room for the involvement of Jews in the story. In their treatment of this verse, Muslim exegetes showed a freedom to make a strong case for an Islamic concept of deity. They attacked what they took to be the wrong faith and false worship of Christians and Jews. They did not generally understand "a common word" to signify a belief which Muslims, Christians and Jews hold in common. Rather, they understood the verse to indicate a call to Christians and/or Jews to acknowledge the "truth" of the speaker. Some Muslim commentators saw this challenge leading in a political direction and appeared to anticipate military engagement for failure to submit to a Muslim concept of deity. Other Muslim interpreters took 3.64 and its preceding context to be a demonstration of a method of rational appeal which they found just and beautiful.

Investigation of this Qur'anic verse will now proceed into observation of the verse in its scriptural context, and secondly into exploration of traditional Muslim understandings of the meaning of the verse as set out in a succession of major commentaries. The commentary passages will then be analyzed for the features of polemic which they display. This will lead finally into some reflections on what medieval Muslim understandings may contribute to the development of peaceable polemic between Christians and Muslims today and in the future.

1. Traditional understandings of the Qur'anic context of 3.64

Observation of the Qur'ānic context of 3.64 suggests that one or more scriptural communities are concerned in this verse. The verse itself contains the expression "people of the book", but it does not specify which audience is in view. The verse immediately following, 3.65, mentions the Torah and the Gospel and the question of the identity of Abraham. Soon after, 3.67 claims that Abraham was neither "a Jew" nor "a Christian."

Preceding 3.64, however, is an extended passage of material which would seem to interest Christians more than Jews. A narrative about the "wife of 'Imrān" begins at verse 35. Mary explicitly enters the narrative at verse 37. Most Muslim

interpreters understood Jesus to be referred to in verse 39 by the expression, "a word from Allah." In any case Jesus is indicated by the names 'Īsā and Messiah at verse 45. In verse 49 the infant Jesus speaks from his cradle about the miracles he will do. The narrative about Jesus continues till verse 55, which seems to refer to the death and ascension of Jesus. Verse 59 seems to be a statement about the nature of Jesus: the assertion here is that Allah created Jesus from dust just as he created Adam. Following this verse, a dispute with people who don't accept the Qur'ānic assertion seems to be referred to in verse 61. Just preceding verse 64, at verse 62, comes the apparent claim that the narrative about Jesus starting at verse 35 is "the true story." Verse 63 seems to concern those who do not accept the Qur'ānic account: "If they turn away, God is aware of those who wreak mischief."

From context alone, therefore, Q3.64 seems to fall between two arguments—one about the identity of Jesus, and the other about the identity of Abraham. This observation may account for the ambivalence which characterizes the traditional Muslim exegetical treatments of the verse.

This particular Qur'ānic context, however, came with a strong tradition about its occasion of revelation. Muslim commentators are generally agreed that the first eighty or so verses of Sūrat Āl 'Imrān were revealed in response to a delegation of Christians who came to Madīna from Najrān.[16] This is the claim of the earliest Muslim biography of Muḥammad, the *Sīrat al-Nabī* of Ibn Isḥāq (d. 767/150).[17] The best-known Muslim work of the "occasions of revelation" of Qur'ānic verses, the *Asbāb al-Nuzūl* of al-Wāḥidī (d. 1076/468), supports this dating of the passage.[18] This tradition is also offered by many Muslim commentaries on the Qur'ān, including the earliest complete extant commentary, the *Tafsīr* of Muqātil ibn Sulaymān (d. 767/150).[19]

---

[16] Mahmoud M. AYOUB, *The Qur'an and Its Interpreters, Vol. II, The House of 'Imrān* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 1.

[17] IBN ISḤĀQ, *Sīrat al-Nabī*, II, p. 415.

[18] Abū al-Ḥasan AL-NĪSĀBŪRĪ AL-WĀḤIDĪ, *Asbāb al-Nuzūl* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2006), p. 50.

[19] *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, ed. Abd Allāh Maḥmūd Shihāta (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Tārīkh al-'Arabiyya, 2002), I, p. 261. See also AL-ṬABARĪ, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, VI, pp. 150, 153; AL-RĀZĪ, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, VII, p. 155; Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Anṣārī AL-QURṬUBĪ, *al-Jāmi' li-Aḥkām al-Qur'ān* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 1967), IV, p. 4. Abū Sa'īd 'Abd Allāh ibn 'Umar ibn Muḥammad ibn 'Alī al-Khayr Naṣīr al-Dīn AL-BAYḌĀWĪ, *Anwār al-tanzīl wa-asrār al-ta'wīl* (Dār al-Ṭibā'ah al-'Āmirah, 1887), I, p. 193.

Ibn Isḥāq enclosed the entire text of Āl ʻImrān 1-64 in a narrative about the encounter of Muḥammad with the Najrān Christians. The Christians, writes Ibn Isḥāq, attempt to make a case for the deity of Jesus to Muḥammad. They confess, "he is Allah", "he is the son of Allah", and "he is the third of three." Muḥammad commands the Christians to "submit." At this point, according to Ibn Isḥāq, Allah sends down the first 80 verses of Āl ʻImrān.[20]

Many Muslim commentators on the Qur'ān offered the story of the delegation of Christians from Najrān closer to their explanations of Q3.64. Muqātil began his narrative of the Najrān visit at verse 59 and continued it through his interpretation of verse 64. His interpretation of these six verses could be said to be completely within the narrative, a typical characteristic of his exegetical method.[21] For Muqātil, the antagonists were the Christians until verse 65, where he turned abruptly to include the leading Jews of Madīna.

Al-Ṭabarī, writing at the end of the third Islamic century, cites a variety of traditions about the occasion of revelation of Q3.64. He attributes to Ibn Isḥāq the tradition that this verse applies to the Najrān Christians.[22] However, this is not the only tradition with which he is familiar, and—as we shall see below—he chooses a different interpretive angle. Interestingly, al-Ṭabarī signalled at the beginning of his commentary on Sūra 3 that he understood the theological significance of 3.64. Even if the Christians of Najrān were intended as the primary audience of the "divine argument (*ḥujja*)" in these verses, he wrote, the message applies to any other people "who share in their rejection of faith (*kufr*) in Allah by taking another being beside Him as a lord and a god and a deity (*maʻbūd*)."[23]

Major Muslim interpreters after al-Ṭabarī differed in their approach to the occasion of revelation of Q3.64, as well in their views of the influence of context for the verse's meaning. Some commentators considered the verse to be of one piece with the preceding verses as part of a scriptural and prophetic demonstration of how to present the truth to non-Muslims. Al-Rāzī, for example, saw the story of the Christians from Najrān—as well as 3.64 and its preceding context—as a lesson in "rational investigation and reasoning (*al-baḥth wa-l-naẓar*)," and as a proof that

---

[20] IBN ISḤĀQ, *Sīrat al-Nabī*, II, pp. 414-415.

[21] J. WANSBROUGH, *Quranic Studies*, pp. 122-131. Wansbrough comments on the similarity of Muqātil's commentary to the *Sīra* of Ibn Isḥāq on page 127.

[22] AL-ṬABARĪ, *Jāmiʻ al-bayān*, VI, p. 484.

[23] AL-ṬABARĪ, *Jāmiʻ al-bayān*, VI, p. 151.

"the use of disputation (*munāẓara*) for the purpose of confirming the faith and removing errors (*shubahāt*) was the way of the prophets."[24]

The traditional narrative of the visit of the Christians from Najrān, best known from Ibn Isḥāq's account,[25] is that a delegation comes to Madīna from the Yemen[26] to make terms with Muhammad when his conquest of the Arabian Peninsula seems unavoidable. The Christians explain to Muḥammad their belief in the deity of Jesus, and Muḥammad denies their claims. At the end of Muḥammad's recitation of Q3.1-64, according to Ibn Isḥāq, Allah commands Muḥammad to challenge the Christians to mutual invocation of a curse (*mulā'ana*).[27] The Christians discuss the matter among themselves and decide not to participate in the cursing ceremony. Instead they leave Muḥammad in his religion and return to Najrān to practice their own religion.[28]

---

[24] AL-RĀZĪ, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, VII, p. 155.

[25] IBN ISḤĀQ, *Sīrat al-Nabī*, II, pp. 412-422. English translation GUILLAUME, pp. 270-277.

[26] There was indeed a vigorous Christian community in Najrān at the start of the seventh century. Irfan Shahîd writes that Christianity was introduced to Najrān in the fifth century through one of its native merchants, named Ḥayyān. "Although the initial Christian impulse came from Ḥīra, where Ḥayyān was baptized, other Christian missionary currents converged on Nadjrān from Byzantine Syria and from Ethiopia, all of which made Nadjrān the main centre of Christianity in South Arabia. Various Christian denominations existed side-by-side in Nadjrān, but Monophysitism was the one that prevailed." "Nadjrān," EI^2, VII, pp. 871-872.

[27] IBN ISḤĀQ, *Sīrat al-Nabī*, II, p. 422. Widely known in Muslim tradition as the *mubāhala*. R. STROTHMANN, "Die Mubāhala in Tradition und Liturgie," *Der Islam* 33 (1957), pp. 5-29.

[28] IBN ISḤĀQ, *Sīrat al-Nabī*, II, p. 422. The earliest Muslim sources offer a diversity of details of the discussion which occurs among the Najrān Christians in response to Muḥammad's *mubāhala* challenge. In IBN ISḤĀQ, the leader of the Christians is convinced of Muḥammad's prophethood and thus advises the delegation that cursing Muḥammad would be disastrous. *Sīrat al-Nabī*, II, p. 422. In MUQĀTIL, the leader simply says that in any scenario, cursing Muḥammad would be disastrous. *Tafsīr*, VI, pp. 282. AL-ṬABARĪ also transmitted a tradition which indicates ambivalence: according to 'Āmir al-Sha'bī, the Christians of Najrān initially accept the *mubāhala* challenge. But when they seek the advice of a wise man from their deputation, he rebukes them: "What have you done? If Muḥammad is a prophet, and he invokes Allah against you, Allah would never anger him by not answering his prayers. If, on the other hand, he is a king, and he were to prevail over you, he would never spare you." *Jāmi' al-Bayān*, VI, p. 478. IBN SA'D did not give details of the deliberations, but had the leader respond to Muḥammad, "We think it proper not to curse you. You may order us as you like and we shall obey you and shall make peace with you." *Al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1957), I, p. 358. See Gordon NICKEL, "'We Will Make Peace With You': The Christians of Najrān in Muqātil's *Tafsīr*," *Collectanea Christiana Orientalia* 3 (2006), pp. 171-188.

2. Meanings of 3.64 in the Muslim interpretive tradition

As noted above, Muqātil interpreted Q3.64 in the midst of his narrative about the delegation of Christians from Najrān. In the verse immediately preceding, Muqātil understood the Christians to be "those who wreak mischief" (*mufsidūn*); he completed the scriptural phrase by adding "…in the earth through rebellion" (*al-ma'āṣī*).[29] These strongly negative descriptions connected in the mind of Muqātil to the Christian refusal in the story to give up their belief in the deity of Jesus and accept *tawḥīd*. When he came to 3.64, the exegete found "Say" to be addressed to Muḥammad. From "a word that is common," Muqātil understood "a word of justice (*'adl*)."[30] To the phrase, "we associate nothing with Him," Muqātil added, "from His creation." When he came to the words, "and we do not take one another as lords to the exclusion of God," he explained, "Because they took 'Īsā as a lord."[31] "If they turn" means "if they reject (*abā*) *tawḥīd*."

On this verse, the early Kufan grammarian al-Farrā' (d. 827/207) immediately noted a variant reading for the phrase, "to a common word between us and you." He wrote that the alternate "reading (*qirā'a*) of 'Abd Allāh" is "to a just (*'adl*) word between us and you."[32] Al-Farrā' brought in a cross reference from a Qur'ānic story about Moses in order to develop the meaning of *sawā'*: "…So fix a tryst between you and us, that neither you nor we shall fail to keep, a convenient (*suwan*) place" (20.58). Al-Farrā' concluded that the term *sawā'* meant equitable (*'adl*) and just (*naṣaf*).[33]

Al-Ṭabarī's approach to the interpretation of 3.64 was quite different from the largely monovalent method of the early commentators. At the end of the third Islamic century, al-Ṭabarī knew a wide variety of traditions on virtually every

---

[29] Plural of *ma'ṣiya*. The verb *'aṣā* carries the sense of disobedience, rebellion, opposition and resistance. Edward William LANE, *An Arabic-English Lexicon: Derived from the best and most copious Eastern sources* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1874), Book I, Part 5, p. 2069.

[30] MUQĀTIL, *Tafsīr*, I, p. 281. The noun *'adl* can have a number of other senses, including equity, rectitude, equivalence, and balance. E.W. LANE, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, Book I, Part 5, p. 1974.

[31] MUQĀTIl, *Tafsīr*, I, p. 281.

[32] Abū Zakariyyā' Yaḥyā b. Ziyād AL-FARRĀ', *Kitāb Ma'ānī al-Qur'ān*, ed. Aḥmad Yūsuf Najātī and Muḥammad 'Alī al-Najjār (Beirut: Dār al-Sarūr, n.d.), I, p. 220.

[33] AL-FARRĀ', *Kitāb Ma'ānī al-Qur'ān*, I, p. 220. E.W. LANE gives many meanings for *sawā'*, including equality, equability, uniformity, evenness, justice, rectitude, and likeness; and translates the clause from Q3.64 as, "Come ye to an equitable, or a just, or right, sentence, or proposition, between us and you." *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, Book I, Part 4, p. 1480.

verse in the Qur'ān. Like Muqātil, he showed an interest in the narratives with which 3:64 had traditionally been connected. With al-Farrā' he shared a deep concern for Arabic grammar. Al-Ṭabarī also indicated an awareness of the theological issues which he found behind the verse, and did not hesitate to characterize theological differences in the starkest terms.

The exegete cited three traditions which connect the verse with the Jews of Madīna,[34] and another three traditions which claim that the verse concerns the delegation of Christians from Najrān, including one tradition which names Ibn Isḥāq in the chain of transmission.[35] In his characteristic manner, al-Ṭabarī then gave his own view: the "people of the book" are the "people of two books," because both the people of the Torah and the people of the Gospel are intended by this call.[36]

From the expression "a common word," al-Ṭabarī understood a "just" (*'adl*) word.[37] He supported this reading with further traditions, arguments from grammar, and cross-references from other occurrences of *sawā'* in the Qur'ān.[38] Al-Ṭabarī also drew attention to a textual variant. He wrote that Ibn Ma'sūd understood the text to read *kalima 'adl* in place of *kalima sawā'*.[39] Al-Ṭabarī further cited a tradition which asserts that the "common word" has a specific verbal content: "no god except Allah."[40]

Al-Ṭabarī's discussion of theological issues begins at the start of his comments on the verse and continues throughout. The "just word" that the verse is referring to is that "we declare Allah to be one (*waḥḥada*), and not worship other than him, and remain free from every deity (*ma'būd*) except him, and not associate anything with him." In his preliminary paraphrase of "we do not take one another as lords," he wrote, "we do not owe obedience (*ṭā'a*) to one another, by which we would defy (*ma'āṣī*) Allah, and magnify ('*aẓẓama*) [another] by worshipping (*sujūd*) him

---

[34] AL-ṬABARĪ, *Jami' al-bayān*, VI, pp. 483-484.
[35] AL-ṬABARĪ, *Jami' al-bayān*, VI, pp. 484-485.
[36] AL-ṬABARĪ, *Jami' al-bayān*, VI, p. 485.
[37] AL-ṬABARĪ, *Jami' al-bayān*, VI, pp. 483, 486, 487.
[38] AL-ṬABARĪ, *Jami' al-bayān*, VI, p. 486. AL-ṬABARĪ quoted from Q22.25, "…which We have assigned to the people, equally (*sawā'*) for those who stay close to it and for the *bedu*…"; and 45.21, "…that We shall make them as those who believe and do righteous deeds, being equal (*sawā'*) in their living and their dying?" He also noted the "Kufan" cross reference to 20.58. AL-ṬABARĪ, *Jami' al-bayān*, VI, p. 487.
[39] AL-ṬABARĪ, *Jami' al-bayān*, VI, p. 487.
[40] AL-ṬABARĪ, *Jami' al-bayān*, VI, p. 488.

in the way the Lord is worshipped."[41] Later in the passage, when he considered the same scriptural phrase separately, al-Ṭabarī wrote that this refers to "the obedience which they accorded their leaders, and by which they committed acts of rebellion (*ma'āṣī*) against Allah."[42]

To support his point, al-Ṭabarī brought in a cross reference from Q9.31: "They have taken their rabbis and monks as lords apart from God as well as *al-Masīḥ*, the son of Mary—yet they were commanded to serve only One God." By quoting this verse in connection with 3.64, al-Ṭabarī made explicit that he had not only religious leaders in mind, but also Jesus. He transmitted a tradition that through such worship, Jews and Christians commit acts of disobedience (*ma'ṣiya*) against Allah.[43] His concerns, and those of his authorities, are that no other being except Allah be obeyed, bowed down to, worshipped, or prayed to.[44] What the opponents are 'turning away from' is the oneness (*tawḥīd*) of Allah, and loyal worship of him.

Al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538 A.H./1144 A.D.) was another major Muslim exegete who understood Q3.64 to be addressed to "the people of the two books"—the delegation of Christians from Najrān and the Jews of Madīna.[45] The expression "common between us and you" he took to mean "on the same level (*mustawiya*) between us and you", concerning which the Qur'ān, Torah and Gospel do not disagree. This "word," wrote al-Zamakhsharī, is then explained by the rest of the verse. He immediately wrote that the call in these words means that "we not say that Ezra is the son of Allah or that the Messiah is the son of Allah." Here the exegete is using the wording of Q9.30, a verse which strongly assails Jews and Christians for making these confessions. Neither Ezra nor the Messiah may be called the son of Allah, "because each of them is a human being (*bashar*) like us."[46] Al-Zamakhsharī's concern was wrong authority and obedience: he wrote that

---

41 AL-ṬABARĪ, *Jami' al-bayān*, VI, p. 483.

42 AL-ṬABARĪ, *Jami' al-bayān*, VI, p. 488. This translation M.M. AYOUB, *The Qur'an and Its Interpreters*, Vol. II, 203.

43 AL-ṬABARĪ, *Jami' al-bayān*, VI, p. 488, trad. 7200. The term *ma'ṣiya* also carries the sense of "insubordination, refractoriness; insurrection, revolt, sedition." Hans WEHR, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*. 4th edition (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1979), p. 723.

44 AL-ṬABARĪ, *Jami' al-bayān*, VI, p. 488 (obey, worship, pray), 489 (bow down).

45 Abū al-Qāsim Jār Allāh Maḥmūd ibn 'Umar AL-ZAMAKHSHARĪ, *al-Kashshāf 'an Ḥaqā'iq al-Tanzīl wa 'Uyūn al-Aqāwīl fī Wujūh al-Ta'wīl* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2006), I, p. 363.

46 AL-ZAMAKHSHARĪ, *al-Kashshāf*, I, 364.

the verse is a call to not obey the rabbis in their "innovations of prohibition and permission without recourse to what Allah has prescribed."[47]

In support of his argument al-Zamakhsharī then quoted Q9.31, with its specification of taking rabbis, monks or the Messiah as lords. He apparently agreed with Muqātil and al-Ṭabarī that the Christian confession of Messiah as Lord clashes with the worship of one God. Al-Zamakhsharī recounted a conversation between the prophet of Islam and ʻAdī ibn Ḥātim in which ʻAdī objects that Christians did not worship (*ʻabada*) their monks. Muḥammad replies that they did in fact do so because the monks "made things lawful and unlawful for you, and you accepted their word."[48] Obeying a created being in this way is rebellion (*maʻṣiya*) against the Creator.[49]

Writing at the end of the 12th Century, perhaps from Herāt at the eastern end of the empire, al-Rāzī began his exegesis of 3.64 by explaining why he chose to interpret the verse as applying to the Christians.[50] He knew of traditions relating the verse to the Jews, but he understood 3.64 to be in continuity with the preceding verses which concern the identity of Jesus. He also saw the verse as an essential part of an important demonstration of how to challenge the Christians to reconsider their belief in the deity of Jesus.[51] The prophet of Islam, wrote al-Rāzī, first presents various effective proofs to the Najrān Christians, then calls them to the *mubāhala*. The Christians are afraid and will not participate in the cursing, but instead accept servility (*ṣaghār*) and payment of the *jizya*. With that now settled, Allah asks Muḥammad to leave argument aside and to take a rational approach based on justice (*inṣāf*), an approach in which there is no deviation (*mail*) toward either of the two parties.[52]

This respect for Christians is warranted, al-Rāzī wrote, because in this verse Allah addresses them as "people of the book of Allah"—a name reserved for

---

47 AL-ZAMAKHSHARĪ, *al-Kashshāf*, I, p. 364.
48 AL-ZAMAKHSHARĪ, *al-Kashshāf*, I, p. 364.
49 AL-ZAMAKHSHARĪ, *al-Kashshāf*, I, p. 364.
50 AL-RĀZĪ, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, VIII, p. 85.
51 AL-RĀZĪ signaled this theme already at the beginning of his comments on Sūra Āl ʻImrān, where he writes that the report of the delegation of Najrān Christians "proves that the use of disputation for the purpose of confirming the faith and removing errors was the way of the prophets." *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, VII, 155.
52 AL-RĀZĪ, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, VII, p. 85; also p. 86.

people of honour in order to put their hearts at ease.[53] In his commentary on 3.64, al-Rāzī wrote that *sawā'* means fairness (*'adl*) and justice (*inṣāf*). He wrote that the three matters specified in the verse are aimed at Christians because Christians combine all three: they worship someone other than Allah; they associate others with Allah;[54] and "they take their rabbis and monks as lords instead of Allah."[55] In support of this latter claim, al-Rāzī wrote that Christians obeyed their rabbis concerning what is permitted and forbidden, and even bowed down (*sajada*) to their rabbis. He also transmitted a tradition from Abū Muslim that when Christians consider a person to have attained a high state of spiritual perfection, they invest him with the attributes of lordship.[56] In this way they follow their leaders in sin (*ma'āṣī*).

Al-Rāzī understands the scriptural phrase "a common word" to mean a word in which there is justice (*inṣāf*) between people in a situation where no one would have an advantage over the other.[57] A striking feature of al-Rāzī's exegesis is his careful explanation of the quality of discourse which he believed was exemplified by Allah's revelation of 3.64 and the behaviour of Muḥammad in its alleged narrative setting. After first presenting proofs and secondly proposing the *mubāhala* to the Christians, "he treated [them] justly on this occasion to the word (*kalām*) based on the consideration of justice, and gave up quarrelling (*mujādala*) and the pursuit of knock-down arguments (*iflḥām*) or coercion (*ilzām*)."[58] Al-Rāzī added that in an appeal to theological truth, "it is imperative, in accordance with sound reason, that people abandon all manner of oppression (*ẓulm*), be it against oneself or others."[59]

Born at the opposite end of the Muslim Empire, the Spanish exegete al-Qurṭubī (d. 1272/671) seemed interested mainly in the legal implications of 3.64. Typical of his method, he organized his explanation of the verse in three questions or issues (*masā'il*).[60] He acknowledged the traditions linking the verse with Christians, or

---

53 AL-RĀZĪ, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, VII, pp. 85-86. Cf. M.M. AYOUB, *The Qur'an and Its Interpreters*, II, p. 206.

54 A translation of this passage was given in the introduction to this article.

55 AL-RĀZĪ, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, VIII, p. 86.

56 AL-RĀZĪ, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, VIII, pp. 86-87.

57 AL-RĀZĪ, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, VIII, p. 86.

58 AL-RĀZĪ, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, VIII, p. 85.

59 AL-RĀZĪ, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, VIII, p. 86.

60 AL-QURṬUBĪ, *al-Jāmi' li-Aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, IV, pp. 105-107.

Jews, or both. Then he mentioned that the verse had also been connected with a document (*kitāb*) which Muḥammad is reported to have sent to the Byzantine emperor Heraclius.[61] Though this story is not cited in the commentaries surveyed to this point, it is offered as a *ḥadīth* in the *kitāb al-tafsīr* in the collection of al-Bukhārī.[62] The letter, according to al-Qurṭubī, contains a charge to "the mighty one of Rome" to submit and embrace Islam. "Then Allah would grant you a double reward. But if you turn away, you will have to bear the sin (*ithm*) of the *Arīsiyyīn*."[63] Following this charge, the text of 3.64 is included in the letter.[64]

For the meaning of *sawā'*, al-Qurṭubī offered *'adl* and *naṣafa* ("justice"), citing al-Farrā', and also passed on the variant reading of 'Abd Allāh, "to a just (*'adl*) word between us and you."[65]

In his explanation of the phrase "we do not take one another as lords to the exclusion of God," al-Qurṭubī seemed concerned about the foundation of authority for law. "[This phrase] means that we not follow them in making lawful or unlawful except what Allah has made lawful."[66] The exegete brought in 9.31 for cross reference: "They have taken their rabbis and their monks as lords apart from God…." The Jews and Christians gave their rabbis and monks the same status as their Lord in accepting their prohibitions and sanctions when Allah had neither forbidden nor permitted these.[67] Apart from Allah, wrote al-Qurṭubī, people must not take anyone as lord, "not Jesus and not Ezra and not the angels," which again partly connects to 9.30. These have no status to determine law, "because they are human (*bashar*) like us."[68]

Al-Qurṭubī also transmitted a tradition attributed to 'Ikrima that in 3.64 the verb "take" (*akhadha*) means "bow down" (*sajada*), and recounted a short story about a custom of bowing down to persons of status in pre-Islamic Arabia. In this tradition, the prophet of Islam forbids bowing, and instructs instead shaking hands.[69]

---

[61] AL-QURṬUBĪ, *al-Jāmi' li-Aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, IV, p. 105.
[62] AL-BUKHĀRĪ, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (Cairo: al-'Arabī, 1955), VI, *kitāb al-tafsīr*.
[63] AL-QURṬUBĪ, *al-Jāmi' li-Aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, IV, pp. 105-106.
[64] AL-QURṬUBĪ, *al-Jāmi' li-Aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, IV, p. 106.
[65] AL-QURṬUBĪ, *al-Jāmi' li-Aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, IV, p. 106.
[66] AL-QURṬUBĪ, *al-Jāmi' li-Aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, IV, p. 106.
[67] AL-QURṬUBĪ, *al-Jāmi' li-Aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, IV, p. 106.
[68] AL-QURṬUBĪ, *al-Jāmi' li-Aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, IV, p. 107.
[69] AL-QURṬUBĪ, *al-Jāmi' li-Aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, IV, p. 107.

Writing during approximately the same period as al-Qurṭubī, al-Bayḍāwī (d. 1286-1316/685-716) produced a very popular shorter commentary by combining selected elements from the works of al-Zamakhsharī and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī. His comments on the verses immediately preceding 3.64 are interesting because they show an important understanding of context.[70] Al-Bayḍāwī made it clear at 3.61 that he understood the dispute to be between the Christians and the messenger, and the point of contention to be the deity of Jesus. There he relayed the traditional account of the *mubāhala*.[71] At 3.62 the exegete wrote that this verse contains the full expression *wa-mā min ilāhin illā Allāhi*,[72] "in order to emphasize the refutation of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity."[73] On 3.63, al-Bayḍāwī agreed with al-Zamakhsharī that the antagonists are turning their backs on *tawḥīd*, and further wrote, "…to reject the evidences and to repudiate the doctrine of the Unity (*tawḥīd*) constitute corruption (*ifsād*)[74] of religion and faith, which leads to corruption of the soul, and indeed, to the destruction of the world."[75]

In his exegesis of 3.64 itself, al-Bayḍāwī first passed on al-Zamakhsharī's ambivalence about whether 3.64 concerns Christians or Jews.[76] The phrase "a common word" meant for al-Bayḍāwī "that wherein there is no variance between the apostles and the books."[77] Al-Bayḍāwī was concerned that people worship only the One who deserves worship. On the phrase, "we associate nothing with Him," the exegete wrote, "we neither make a partner for him in deserving (*istiḥqāq*) worship, nor regard another as worthy (*ahl*) to be worshipped."[78] Like others before him, al-Bayḍāwī connected the phrase "we do not take one another as lords to the exclusion of God" with 9.30. We must not say that Ezra is the son of Allah or that the Messiah is the son of Allah, he wrote, "nor obey the rabbis in their

---

70 AL-BAYḌĀWĪ, *Anwār al-tanzīl*, I, pp. 210-211.
71 AL-BAYḌĀWĪ, *Anwār al-tanzīl*, I, pp. 210-211.
72 Similar to the first part of the *shahāda*.
73 AL-BAYḌĀWĪ, *Anwār al-tanzīl*, I, p. 211.
74 Verbal noun of *afsada*, a verb with many stongly negative meanings, including to corrupt, to deprave, to pervert, and to destroy. E.W. LANE, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, Book I, Part 6, p. 2396.
75 AL-BAYḌĀWĪ, *Anwār al-tanzīl*, I, p. 211. Translations in these paragraphs from D.S. MARGOLIOUTH, *Chrestomathia Baidawiana: The Commentary of el-Baiḍāwī on Sura III* (London: Luzac & Co. 1894), pp. 45-46.
76 AL-BAYḌĀWĪ, *Anwār al-tanzīl*, I, p. 211.
77 AL-BAYḌĀWĪ, *Anwār al-tanzīl*, I, p. 211.
78 AL-BAYḌĀWĪ, *Anwār al-tanzīl*, I, p. 211.

inventions concerning things lawful and unlawful; for each one of them is only one of us, and human like us."[79] Al-Bayḍāwī also quoted 9.31 and related the story found in al-Zamakhsharī in which a listener to the recitation of this verse objects that the Jews did not in fact worship their rabbis.[80]

At the end of his explanation of the verse, al-Bayḍāwī added a note (*tanbīh*) to draw the reader's attention to the role of 3.64 in the larger demonstration of how Allah, through the prophet of Islam, deals with the Christians from Najrān.

> Observe in this story the catechetical skill employed and the beautiful stages in the polemicizing process.[81] First he explains the circumstances of Jesus, and the events passing over him which contradict (*munāfīya*) his deity (*ulūhīya*). Then he states what will solve their difficulties and clear away their false notions (*shubha*). Then, when he sees their opposition (*'inād*) and litigiousness (*lajāja*), he invites them to the mutual execration, with a rhetorical figure. Then when they declined that, and partly yielded, he once more endeavoured to instruct them, going an easier (*ashal*) and more convincing (*alzam*) way, by summoning them to accept the doctrine whereon he, Jesus, and Gospel and all the Books and Apostles were agreed; but when this too did not help them, and he knew that signs and preaching would not avail them, he relinquished the task, saying merely, "Bear witness that *we* are Muslims."[82]

Though al-Bayḍāwī knew of traditions which brought the Jews of Madīna into this verse, he appeared to side with al-Rāzī in the understanding that 3.64 belongs with the preceding passage 3.35-63, and that it thus takes meaning from that context.

In his exegesis of 3.64, Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373/774) was more interested in political questions than in either theological reflection or polemical beauty.[83] He devoted his greatest attention to the story of the letter which Muḥammad is reported to have sent to Heraclius, and to the question of how this story and the tradition about the Christians of Najrān could be linked with 3.64 if the *jizya* verse

---

79 AL-BAYḌĀWĪ, *Anwār al-tanzīl*, I, p. 211.

80 AL-BAYḌĀWĪ, *Anwār al-tanzīl*, I, p. 211.

81 *Al-mubālagha fī l-irshād wa ḥusn al-tadarruj fī l-ḥijāj*.

82 AL-BAYḌĀWĪ, *Anwār al-tanzīl*, I, p. 212. Translation by D.S. MARGOLIOUTH, *Chrestomathia Baidawiana*, p. 46.

83 Al-Qurayshī al-Dimashqī 'Imād al-Dīn Abī Fidā' Ismā'īl IBN KATHĪR, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Aẓīm* (Beirut: Dār al-Andalus, 1966), II, pp. 53-54.

(9.29) was revealed only after the conquest of Makka. At the start of his explanation of 3.64, Ibn Kathīr wrote that this verse includes both Jews and Christians. The "common word" is just (*'adl*) and fair (*naṣaf*) and puts all on the same level. Among the things which people falsely associate with Allah, Ibn Kathīr listed a statue, a cross, an idol, false gods (*ṭāghūt*) and fire.[84] He wrote that the command to worship Allah alone was the message of all of Allah's messengers, and quoted two verses in support of this, Q21.25 and 16.36.

Ibn Kathīr cited al-Bukhārī as the source of the tradition about the letter of Muḥammad to Heraclius.[85] The exegete transmitted the story substantially as al-Qurṭubī had done before him. Ibn Kathīr then introduced the tradition from Ibn Isḥāq that more than eighty verses at the beginning of Sūra 3 were revealed about the Christians from Najrān, and the tradition from al-Zuhrī that the people of Najrān were the first to pay the *jizya*. How is that possible, asked the exegete, if the verse of *jizya* (9.29) was revealed only later after the conquest of Makka?[86] Among the possible answers, Ibn Kathīr suggested that the payment made by the Najrān Christians was in lieu of the *mubāhala*, not as *jizya*. The later recitation of 9.29 then agreed with what occurred with the Christians. In a similar way, wrote Ibn Kathīr, it is possible that the prophet of Islam wrote the words of 3.64 in a letter to Heraclius before the conquest of Makka, and that later on, "[Allah] sent down the recitation in agreement (*muwāfaqa*) with him."[87]

3. Traditional understandings of Qur'anic material as polemical

This survey of traditional understandings of a single verse reveals a remarkable consensus among Muslim exegetes during the early centuries of Islam that a large and significant passage of Qur'ānic material was polemical. Not all of the major commentaries in the Muslim interpretive tradition understand Q3.64 to concern Christians alone. A number of the commentaries bring the Jews into the circle of the antagonists. However, all of the commentaries, from the earliest in existence through the classical period and even to those of the present day, understand Q3.64 to be addressed to people who have a false concept of deity. They perceive the

---

84 IBN KATHĪR, *Tafsīr*, II, p. 53.
85 IBN KATHĪR, *Tafsīr*, II, p. 53.
86 IBN KATHĪR, *Tafsīr*, II, p. 54.
87 IBN KATHĪR, *Tafsīr*, II, p. 54.

challenge of 3.64 to be a call to the only true concept of deity, summarized by the term *tawḥīd*.

The commentary passages described above display a number of distinct features of polemic. First, they frame the questions at issue between Muslims and non-Muslims in terms of truth and falsehood. Muslim writers claim that the Islamic concept of deity is true, and simply call false whatever differs from that concept. Second, the Muslim writers do not hesitate to characterize false concepts and those who hold them in the most negative language. They seem to show no concern that strong disagreement over truth claims would "cause offense" to the opponent. Third, in their commentary on the context of 3.64, they provide examples of polemic from prophetic tradition and from their own experience through which they recommend good ways to silence the opponent. In order to further illustrate these features of polemic, particular mention will be made of al-Rāzī, that "intellectual diamond cutter" of classical Muslim exegetes.[88] Al-Rāzī displayed great virtuosity in his use of all of the interpretive disciplines while effectively communicating a distinctive theological message.

3.1. Polemic in the service of truth

The exegesis of Q3.64 by some of the major commentators in the Muslim interpretive tradition shows a lively concern for the identity of Allah and his true worship. The Qur'ānic context prepares the reader for such a concern with the phrase, "the truth is from your Lord," at 3.60, and "this is the true story," at 3.62. These great scholars seemed to share a willingness to pursue the truth no matter what non-Muslims might think.

The theological issues connected with Q3.64, as suggested by context and commentary, are no inconsequential or peripheral issues. In the larger context immediately preceding 3.64, 3.55 seems to refer to the death and ascension of Jesus. Verse 59 appears to be an assertion about the nature of Jesus. These are among the most important—many would say the two most important—concerns of the New Testament. The scholars of the Muslim interpretive tradition generally understood Q3.54-55 to deny the death of Jesus,[89] and took 3.59 to deny the deity

---

[88] N. CALDER, "Tafsīr from Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr …," in G.R. HAWTING and Abdul-Kader A. SHAREEF (eds.), *Approaches to the Qur'ān*, p. 114.

[89] MUQĀTIL, *Tafsīr*, I, pp. 278-279. AL-FARRĀ', *Kitāb Ma'ānī al-Qur'ān*, I, pp. 218-219. 'Abd al-Razzāq ibn Hammām ibn Nāfi' AL-ṢAN'ĀNĪ, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Azīz*, *Tafsīr 'Abd al-Razzāq* (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifa, 1991), I, p. 129. AL-ṬABARĪ, *Jami' al-bayān*, VI, pp. 454-461. AL-

of Jesus.[90] Verses 60-63 then seem to insist on the truth of both denials and issue a challenge to those who don't accept this "knowledge" (3.61). Theological issues are set within the limits of truth and authority. Who has authority to declare "the true story" about Jesus?

The Muslim accounts of the meeting between Muḥammad and the Christians from Najrān illustrate this approach in a dramatic way. Some Muslim scholars evidently understood that prior to coming to Madīna, the Najrān Christians have already heard Muslim claims about the identity of Jesus. Muqātil, for example, wrote that the leaders of the Najrān delegation ask, "O Muḥammad, why do you villify (*shatama*) and dishonor (*'āba*) our master (*ṣāḥib*)?"[91] In this account, Muḥammad responds, "What master of yours?" Muqātil also wrote that the two Christian leaders become angry (*ghaḍiba*) at Muḥammad's denial of Jesus' deity.[92]

Such offence was evidently not considered a reason to hesitate to declare what the commentators saw as the truth about Jesus and their duty to protect Allah from association with him.

3.2. Those who reject *tawḥīd*

In fact, the Qur'ānic context again prepares the exegetes to use straightforward language to describe those whom they understand to be rejecting the unity (*tawḥīd*) of Allah. Those who do not accept the Qur'ānic narrative about Jesus are called

---

ZAMAKHSHARĪ, *al-Kashshāf*, I, pp. 359-360. AL-RĀZĪ, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, VIII, pp. 65-71. AL-QURṬUBĪ, *al-Jāmi' li-Aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, pp. 98-101. IBN KATHĪR, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Aẓīm*, II, pp. 43-45. See also J.D. MCAULIFFE, *Qur'ānic Christians: An analysis of classical and modern exegesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 129-159; M.M. AYOUB, "Towards an Islamic Christology, pt. 2: The death of Jesus, reality or delusion? (A study of the death of Jesus in *Tafsīr* literature)," *The Muslim World* 70 (1980), pp. 91-121; and Joseph L. CUMMING, "Did Jesus Die on the Cross: Reflections in Muslim Commentaries," in J. Dudley WOODBERRY, Osman ZÜMRÜT and Mustafa KÖYLÜ (eds.), *Muslim and Christian Reflections on Peace: Divine and Human Dimensions* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2005), 32-50. Much controversy in traditional interpretation of 3.55 surrounded the rendering of *mutawaffīka*. A.H. Mathias ZAHNISER discusses this term in "The forms of tawaffā in the Qur'ān: A contribution to Christian-Muslim dialogue," *Muslim World* 79/1 (1989), pp. 14-24.

[90] See the translations of a wide selection of classical commentary in M.M. AYOUB, *The Qur'an and its Interpreters*, II, pp. 183-188.

[91] MUQĀTIL, *Tafsīr*, I, p. 280. This question also appears in AL-WĀḤIDĪ's version of the encounter: "Why do you abuse (*shatama*) our master?" *Asbāb al-Nuzūl*, 54 (on Q3.59).

[92] MUQĀTIL, *Tafsīr*, I, p. 281.

perpetrators of corruption (*mufsidūn*) in 3.63. Muqātil understood this to mean rebellion (*ma'āṣī).* In their exegesis of 3.64, al-Ṭabarī, al-Zamakhsharī and al-Rāzī used forms of *ma'ṣiya* to characterize the worship of Christians and Jews. In the Muslim interpretive tradition, many commentators understood *ma'ṣiya* to refer to a major sin.[93]

Al-Ṭabarī also wrote that Christians are rejecting faith in Allah "by taking another being beside Him as a lord and a god and a deity." Al-Ṭabarī understood the worship of Jews and Christians to be false worship, and did not hesitate to name it as such. Al-Bayḍāwī took this language a step further. At 3.63 he wrote that "…to reject the evidences and to repudiate the doctrine of the unity (*tawḥīd*) constitute corruption (*ifsād*) of religion and faith, which leads to corruption of the soul, and indeed, to the destruction of the world." Al-Bayḍāwī characterized the Christians who do not accept the authority of Muḥammad as obstinate and litigious.

This is not a pluralist or post-modern sensibility. In the mind of al-Bayḍāwī, to misunderstand the divine unity results in the destruction of the world, and the "corrupters" of 3.63 he understands to be the Christians.

3.3. Recommendations for polemical style

Al-Rāzī described at a number of points what he saw as the polemical dimensions of the reply of Muḥammad to the Christians from Najrān. He also evidently included accounts of his own polemic with Christians whom he met at the eastern end of the Muslim Empire at the end of the 12th Century.

For al-Rāzī, God himself is speaking in a polemical mode in the context of 3.64. On 3.61, the so-called verse of *mubāhala*, he wrote, "Know that Allah elucidated with many incontrovertible arguments (*dalā'il*) the falsity (*fasād*) of the claim of the Christians that God had a consort and child. He concluded his discourse with this final argument concerning the falsity of their claims."[94]

In his comments on the beginning of the third *sūra*, al-Rāzī narrated how the prophet of Islam "took up the dispute" (*nāẓara*) with the Christians from Najrān

---

[93] Muhammad Qasim ZAMAN, "Sin, Major and Minor," in J.D. MCAULIFFE (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, V, p. 19.

[94] AL-RĀZĪ, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, VIII, pp. 77-78.

during his encounter with them. The debating style consists of a series of questions which Muḥammad poses to them.[95]

> Do you not know that Allah is living [cf. Q3.2] and will never die, while Jesus is subject to extinction (*fanā'*)?
> Do you not know that there is no child but that he must resemble his father?
> Do you not know that our Lord has control over everything which He alone preserves and sustains? Does Jesus possess the power to do any of these things?
> Do you not know that nothing is hidden from Allah on earth or in heaven? [cf. Q3.5] Does Jesus know anything of this other than what he was taught?
> It is our Lord who formed Jesus in the womb as He willed. [cf. Q3.6] Do you know that our Lord neither eats nor drinks, nor does he void?[96] Do you not know that the mother of Jesus bore him in the same manner as women bear their children, and delivered him as they do, then he ate, drank, and voided?
> How could it then be as you claim?[97]

The Christians answer "yes" to questions one, two and five, and "no" to questions three and four. To the final question, al-Rāzī narrated, the Christians comprehended (*'arafū*), but then rejected the argument (*juḥūd*), saying, "Muḥammad, don't you claim that [Jesus] is the word of Allah and a spirit from Him?" Muḥammad answers "yes" and the Christians say "we thought so." Al-Rāzī wrote that at this point Allah sends down the verse, "those in whose hearts is deviation follow [the verses] that are like one another" (3.7).[98]

But al-Rāzī also brought into his commentary material from polemical discussions he evidently had with Christians in his own day. One example of such material is included in his comments on 3.61.[99] Al-Rāzī wrote, "It so happened that when I was in Khwārizm, I was informed that a Christian (*Naṣrānī*) came appealing for verification and deep study of their doctrine. So I went to him. We began with small talk, then he asked me, 'What is the proof (*dalā'il*) of the

---

[95] AL-RĀZĪ, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, VII, p. 155.

[96] *Aḥdatha ḥadath*, with the sense of ritual impurity. H. WEHR, *Arabic-English Dictionary*, p. 189.

[97] AL-RĀZĪ, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, VII, p. 155.

[98] AL-RĀZĪ, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, VII, p. 155. At an earlier stage, AL-ṬABARĪ recounted this series of questions in a slightly different order, though with the same content. Perhaps to sharpen the point, he added to question five, "[Do you not know that Jesus] was fed like a boy is fed?" AL-ṬABARĪ, *Jami' al-bayān*, VI, p. 154. AL-WĀḤIDĪ transmits al-Ṭabarī's sequence of questions in *Asbāb al-Nuzūl*, 50.

[99] AL-RĀZĪ, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, VIII, pp. 77-83.

prophethood of Muḥammad?'"[100] Al-Rāzī answers that miracles (*mu'jiza*) and unbroken witness (*tawātur*) prove the prophethood of Muḥammad—just as they prove the prophethood of all prophets. If these proofs are not allowed for Muḥammad, al-Rāzī argues, then the prophethood of all other prophets would be similarly put in question. The Christian counters, "I don't say concerning Jesus that he is a prophet, but rather that he is God."[101] This turns the conversation away from Muḥammad's prophethood toward the deity of Jesus. Al-Rāzī's spur-of-the-moment refutation of the deity of Jesus includes the following argument:

> Allah is a non-contingent existent (*wājib al-wujūd*) in himself. It is necessary that he should not be a body; he should not occupy space; nor should he be an accident. Jesus was a human corporeal person who came into being after he was not (*ma'dūm*). He was killed after he was alive, as you claim (*'alā qawlikum*). He was an infant then he grew up into adolescence and manhood. He ate and drank, voided and slept and woke up. It is stipulated in the self-evident truths of reason (*badā'ih al-'aqūl*) that anyone who voids (*muḥdith*) could not be eternal, nor could anyone who is lacking be self-sufficient. A contingent being could not be necessary, nor one who is subject to change be permanent.[102]

Al-Rāzī then seemed to address an aside to the reader before he continued his report of his conversation with the Christian in Khwārizm:

> Concerning the thwarting (*ibṭāl*) of this assertion that they confess, that the Jews took him and crucified him and left him alive upon the post (*khashaba*), and tore his chest, and that he was outwitted (*yaḥtāl*) in escaping or disappearing from them, and when they treated him in these relationships in this extremely distressing way: If Jesus were God, or if God incarnated in him, or if part of God was woven into him, why did he not rid himself of them, and why did he not destroy them completely? And what need was there for him to suffer from them and to be outwitted in escaping from them? By Allah I am astonished![103]

Al-Rāzī wondered aloud how anyone could consider this depraved thinking (*fasād*) reasonable, then continued. "Whether they say that God is this visible bodily person, or that God fully incarnated in him, or that part of God incarnated in

---

[100] AL-RĀZĪ, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, VII, p. 155.
[101] AL-RĀZĪ, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, VII, p. 155.
[102] AL-RĀZĪ, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, VIII, p. 78.
[103] AL-RĀZĪ, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, VIII, p. 78.

him, [or speak of] three parts, [each of these beliefs is] false (*bāṭil*).” Once more he expressed his amazement: “If the God of the world were this body, then when the Jews killed him they in fact killed the God of the world. How could the world survive without a God?”[104] At the end of his aside, the exegete attempted to highlight one further absurdity. It is generally accepted by Christians themselves, he wrote, that Jesus was a man of great devotion and obedience to God. It is preposterous (*istaḥāla*) that he be God, because God does not worship himself![105]

Al-Rāzī then returned to his report of the conversation, in which he poses a leading question to the Christian, “On what basis do you infer the deity of Jesus?” The Christian answers, “on the basis of the splendour of his miracles (*‘ajā’ib*), such as raising the dead and healing the blind and the leper, which could only happen by the power of almighty God.”[106] Among his arguments in reply, al-Rāzī says that turning a staff into a snake was a greater miracle than reviving the dead. This is because the resemblance between a dead and a living body is far closer than that between a stick and a snake. Hence, Moses should be more deserving than Jesus of being God or the son of God, yet no one has asserted this of him.[107]

Al-Rāzī wrote that his last set of arguments stops the *Naṣrānī* in his tracks, and “he had nothing left to say.”[108]

If this is an accurate report of al-Rāzī’s conversation with a Christian in Central Asia, it bears considerable interest for the history of interfaith conversation. Even if it is not a true report, it shows the perceptions of Christianity in the mind of an intelligent medieval Muslim scholar. In any case it opens a window into ways of polemic which had developed by the 12th Century. These and other examples show that the prophethood of Muḥammad and the deity of Jesus were intertwined polemical issues in early Islam. The truth of the Qur’anic denial of the deity of

---

[104] AL-RĀZĪ, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, VIII, p. 79. This and other questions posed by al-Rāzī in this passage are of course an aspect of his polemic—they are rhetorical. However, some of these questions come close to the wording and concerns of the New Testament, which the *Naṣārā* in the Eastern part of the Muslim empire presumably had access to. For example, in Acts 3:15, Peter accuses the Jewish religious leaders in Jerusalem: “You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this.” This suggests both an interesting line of scholarly enquiry into how Christians living within the Muslim Empire responded to this particular polemic, and an area of useful explanation and discussion in Christian-Muslim dialogue today.

[105] AL-RĀZĪ, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, VIII, p. 79.

[106] AL-RĀZĪ, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, VIII, p. 79.

[107] AL-RĀZĪ, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, VIII, pp. 79-80.

[108] AL-RĀZĪ, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, VIII, p. 80.

Jesus, as well as the authority of Muḥammad to recite it, would inevitably fall if the prophethood of Muḥammad were not accepted.

Another observation on these exhibits of polemic is that in reference to Jesus, the key points of denial were his deity and his death. In fact, in Muslim polemic the two Christian confessions are used against each other, as demonstrated in the conversation of al-Rāzī above.[109] This brilliant and creative Muslim scholar also appeared to lack any reluctance to say things about Jesus which the Christians of his day would no doubt have found an insulting diminution of Jesus' true identity.

These impressions about the polemical interpretation of Q3.64 and its context in early works of Qur'anic commentary seem to be borne out by archaeological evidence, such as the inscriptions in the gallery of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. The striking preoccupation of these inscriptions, evidently commissioned by the 'Umayyad caliph 'Abd al-Malik in 691 A.D., is the deity of Jesus and the divine sonship of Jesus. Both Christian confessions are repeatedly denied, and the corresponding affirmations are the apostleship and authority of Muḥammad, including the command also at 33.57 that just as Allah and the angels "pray for" (*ṣallā 'alā*) the prophet, believers are to do so as well.[110] These traditional understandings of Qur'anic material as polemical would also seem to be supported by those documents which put themselves forward as debates between Muslims and Christians during the early centuries of Islam.[111]

---

[109] IBN ISḤĀQ set the confession of the death of Jesus in opposition to the phrase in 3.2, "…the Living, the Eternal." "He does not die, whereas Jesus died and was crucified according to their doctrine." *Sīrat al-Nabī*, II, p. 415.

[110] Full English translations of the inscriptions on the Dome of the Rock are given in Oleg GRABAR, *The Shape of the Holy: Early Islamic Jerusalem* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 59-61. Andrew RIPPIN provides a fascinating discussion of the significance of the inscriptions in *Muslims: Their Beliefs and Practices*, 3rd edition (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 66-70.

[111] Many good examples of this interesting literature are available, including Daniel J. SAHAS, *John of Damascus on Islam: The "Heresy of the Ishmaelites"* (Leiden: Brill, 1972). Arthur JEFFERY, "Ghevond's text of the correspondence between 'Umar II and Leo III," *Harvard Theological Review* XXXVII (1944), pp. 269-321. Alphonse MINGANA, "The Apology of Timothy the Patriarch before the Caliph Mahdi," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 12 (1928), pp. 137-146, 147-226. William MUIR, *The Apology of Al Kindy* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1887). John C. LAMOREAUX, *Theodore Abū Qurrah* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2006). See also, among many fine descriptions, Samir Khalil SAMIR and Jørgen S. NIELSEN (eds.), *Christian Arabic Apologetics during the Abbasid Period (750-1258)* (Leiden: Brill, 1994); and recently, Sidney GRIFFITH, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), especially chapter four.

3.4. Political impulses

A belief that wrong theology can result in the destruction of the world would provide strong motivation to make the best case for the truth about God. Indeed, two of the commentators claim that Q3.64 and the preceding verses provide a model for how believers can make the very best rational case for the truth. Their views will be discussed below. As we have seen, however, two of the commentators take the verse in a political direction. By bringing in the story of a letter sent by Muḥammad to the Byzantine emperor Heraclius, al-Qurṭubī and Ibn Kathīr appear to associate 3.64 with political negotiations related to the expanding Muslim Empire. According to their account, if Heraclius does not "submit," he will have to bear the "sin of the *Arīsiyyīn*."[112] The call to "come to a word that is common between you and us" seems here to be related to concerns of conquest and political sovereignty.

The cross-referencing of Q9.30 by three of the commentators,[113] and of Q9.31 by four of the commentators,[114] raises the question of how these and other commentators understood the relationship of false theological views to violence against those who hold such views. Q9.30 contains a strong expression for those who say that Ezra or the Messiah is the son of Allah: "God fights (*qātala*) against them." Immediately preceding these two verses is the so-called "verse of tribute": "Fight from among the people who have been given the Scripture those who do not believe in God and the Last Day and who do not forbid that which God and His messenger have forbidden and who do not follow the religion of truth, until they pay the tribute readily, having been humbled" (9.29).

As we have seen, it is 9.29 which Ibn Kathīr wanted to discuss in relation to 3.64. The scriptural context of 9.29-31 seems to reflect a situation of military engagement. To what extent were these commentators thinking that disagreement with the Muslim concept of God should eventually lead to armed combat?

---

[112] Suggestions for the meaning of *Arīsiyyīn* here have included "the peasants," and the followers of Arius. Nadia Maria EL-CHEIKH writes that according to tradition, a "similar" letter was sent to the Sassanian emperor bidding him "to embrace Islam or do battle." "Muḥammad and Heraclius: A Study in Legitimacy," *Studia Islamica* 89 (1999), pp. 11-12.

[113] AL-ZAMAKHSHARĪ, *al-Kashshāf*, I, p. 363; AL-QURṬUBĪ, *al-Jāmi' li-Aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, IV, p. 107; AL-BAYḌĀWĪ, *Anwār al-tanzīl*, I, p. 211.

[114] AL-ṬABARĪ, *Jami' al-bayān*, VI, p. 488. AL-ZAMAKHSHARĪ, *al-Kashshāf*, I, p. 364; AL-QURṬUBĪ, *al-Jāmi' li-Aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, IV, p. 106; AL-BAYḌĀWĪ, *Anwār al-tanzīl*, I, p. 211.

In his comments on Q9.29, al-Rāzī returned to his disagreement with Christian confessions: their beliefs in Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in Incarnation (*ḥulūl*) and in "merged oneness" (*ittiḥād*), by which they negate (*nāfā*) deity.[115] By confessing such beliefs, plus their belief that the hypostasis (*uqnūm*) of the word (*kalima*) incarnated in Jesus,[116] Christians show that they don't believe in Allah at all,[117] and thus demonstrate the truth of God's description of them in 9.29. Their error is not simply in relation to the attributes of God, but rather related to His very essence. Further along in his interpretation of 9.29, al-Rāzī appeared to show his belief that it was this false faith of the Christians—and no other reason—which made them deserving of Muslim attack "until they pay the tribute readily, having been humbled."[118] The exegete even wrote that the ambiguous phrase *'an yadin* can be understood in the sense of benefaction (*in'ām*). Quoting al-Zamakhsharī, al-Rāzī wrote that "accepting the *jizyah* from them and sparing their lives (*tark arwāḥihim*) is a great blessing (*ni'ma 'aẓīma*) for them."[119]

At 9.30, al-Rāzī continued his focus on the false faith of the Christians.[120] He wrote that Christians commit *shirk*, and that there is no difference between those who worship an idol and those who worship Jesus or another being. On second thought, al-Rāzī wrote, the *shirk* of Christians is actually worse than that of polytheists (*mushrikūn*). Polytheists never say that their idol is the creator of the universe, or that it is the God of the universe; they simply worship the idol as a way of seeking access to God. Christians, by contrast, affirm the reality of the Incarnation and "merged oneness." This is truly abominable unbelief (*kufr qabīḥ jiddan*).

---

[115] AL-RĀZĪ, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, XVI, p. 28. Cf. R. ARNALDEZ, "Les Chrétiens selon le commentaire coranique de Râzî," in Pierre Salmon (ed.), *Mélanges d'Islamologie* (Leiden: Brill, 1974), p. 54; and J.D. MCAULIFFE, "Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī on *āyat al-jizyah* and *āyat al-sayf*," in Michael GERVERS and Ramzi Jibran BIHAZI (eds.), *Conversion and Continuity: Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands, Eighth to Eighteenth Centuries* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990), p. 107.

[116] AL-RĀZĪ, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, XVI, p. 28.

[117] AL-RĀZĪ, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, XVI, p. 29.

[118] J.D. MCAULIFFE, "Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī," p. 108.

[119] AL-RĀZĪ, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, XVI, p. 30. Cf. J.D. MCAULIFFE, "Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī," p. 109.

[120] AL-RĀZĪ, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, XVI, pp. 32-36. Cf. R. ARNALDEZ, "Les Chrétiens," pp. 55-56. Jacques JOMIER, "Unité de Dieu, Chrétiens et Coran selon Faḫr al-Dīn al-Rāzī," *Islamochristiana* 6 (1980), pp. 152-153.

If there is indeed no difference between Christians and polytheists, al-Rāzī asked, why do the people of the book get favoured treatment rather than being put to death (the punishment for *mushikūn* which he understood from 9.5). It is only because of outward appearances, he answered. The people of the book claim a connection to Moses and Jesus and pretend to act according to the Torah and Gospel. In honour of these two prophets and their two books, al-Rāzī wrote, and in honour of Jews and Christians in the past who followed the true religion, Allah decided that the *jizya* could be accepted from them.[121] However, al-Rāzī repeated, in reality there is no difference between the people of the book and the polytheists.

In this exegesis of 9.29-30, al-Rāzī appeared to link the theological error which he attributed to the people of the book with a command to fight them. He even seemed to suggest that the imposition of *jizya* was a "kindness" which the people of the book did not deserve. Not all Muslims would agree with this approach, but, as Jacques Jomier suggests, since al-Rāzī's view corresponds to one of the basic tendencies of Muslim thought, it deserves to be examined in more depth.[122] How representative would al-Rāzī's approach be among traditionalist and "salafi" Muslims today? In recent years, the views of Sayyid Quṭb on Q9.29-31 have been noted.[123] Quṭb wrote extensively on 9.29-31 in his popular commentary, *Fī Ẓilāl al-Qur'ān*. His understanding of 9.29-31 seems to share many features with al-Rāzī's exegesis of the same passage referred to above. Quṭb's comments raise at least two important questions related to this study. First, is Quṭb in line with the Muslim interpretive tradition in what he says about Christian beliefs? Neal Robinson suggests that he is.[124] Second, what is the status of Quṭb's interpretations of the Qur'ān among young Muslims today? Yvonne Y. Haddad points out that Quṭb's commentary has seen wide circulation and has exerted extensive influence.[125] If Muslims look to this and similar Islamist writings as their way into

---

[121] AL-RĀZĪ, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, XVI, p. 33.

[122] J. JOMIER, "Unité de Dieu", p. 153.

[123] Neal ROBINSON, "Sayyid Quṭb's Attitude Towards Christianity: Sūra 9.29-35 in *Fī Ẓilāl al-Qur'ān*," in Lloyd Ridgeon (ed.), *Islamic Interpretations of Christianity* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001), pp. 159-178.

[124] N. ROBINSON, "Sayyid Quṭb's Attitude," p. 173. Robinson writes that Quṭb, however, was at odds with "traditional Sunni Islam" regarding the meaning of "God's promise to make the religion of truth prevail over every religion." Ibid.

[125] Yvonne Y. HADDAD, "Sayyid Quṭb, Ideologue of Islamic Revival," in John L. Esposito (ed.), *Voices of Resurgent Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 67-68. Cf. N. ROBINSON, "Sayyid Quṭb's attitude," p. 176.

the meanings of the Qur'ān, what approach will they tend to take toward interfaith dialogue?[126]

3.5. A good way to call people to the truth

None of the commentaries surveyed in this study understands "a common word" in 3.64 to mean a theological concept which Muslims, Christians and Jews hold in common. However, some of the exegetes took the expression in the direction of a kind of dialogue in which truth is taken seriously and where rational discourse replaces acrimony. These exegetes saw the entire preceding context in Sūra 3 as a demonstration of an exemplary way to call non-Muslims to the truth. al-Rāzī in particular seemed to envision a scenario in which no one dialogue partner had an unjust advantage over another.

Al-Rāzī judged Q3.64 to be the final accomplishment in a series of steps for how to dispute on theological matters in a good way. He understood that in 3.64 Muḥammad, and through him Allah, treated the Christians with a view to justice. "He gave up quarrelling and the pursuit of knock-down arguments or coercion." After al-Rāzī, al-Bayḍāwī too picked up on the theme of a demonstration of "the beautiful stages in the polemicizing process." However, al-Bayḍāwī's description lacks the sensitive language of al-Rāzī and al-Rāzī's apparent insight into what constitutes a "just" dialogue.

Was al-Rāzī encouraging a free, reasoned discussion in which theological differences are faced squarely and conversation partners do their best to challenge the thinking of the other through rational discourse? His language about "oppression" (*ẓulm*) could possibly refer to a situation in which one of the partners holds physical power over the other. Al-Rāzī seemed to be inadvertently projecting the dream of a level conversation field in which rational discourse characterizes the dialogue rather than fear of reprisal on the one hand or political dominance on the other. In other words, through the series of steps which al-Rāzī had in mind, he ended up with what he considered to be the most just and intelligent way of dealing with theological difference. If this is so, the encounter he proposed must be

---

[126] Interestingly, in another of his writings, Sayyid Quṭb cited Q3.64 in the context of his argument for "Jihād in the Cause of Allah." In *Milestones*, Mohammed Moinuddin Siddiqui, ed. (Kuwait: International Islamic Federation of Student Organizations, 1989), 104. He also wrote at the end of his comments on 3.64 in *Fī ẓilāl al-Qur'ān* that if the people of the Book did not respond positively to the call in the verse, "this would be the final separation, a separation after which there is no friendship or dialogue." M.M. AYOUB, *The Qur'an and its Interpreters*, II, p. 208.

characterized in the way he evidently intended. This is a conversation in which truth is taken with utmost seriousness, and partners are free to use the strongest arguments—and rhetoric—in order to prove their case.

3.6. Reflections on interfaith conversation

The understandings of Muslim scripture shared by major commentators in the Muslim interpretative tradition suggest a number of directions for interfaith conversation today and in the future.

Though modernist and postmodern interpretations of the Qur'ān which seek to detach from traditional understandings tend to attract the attention of many non-Muslims, especially in the West, the question must be asked as to which understandings command greatest authority among large blocks of traditional Muslims in Muslim-majority societies. Andrew Rippin observes that "The Traditionalist group holds to the full authority of the past, and that change should not and does not affect the traditions of the past." He suggests that in addition to many of the *'ulamā'* and Sufi groups, the Traditionalist group includes "the vast majority of those who have not been exposed to modern education."[127] Tariq Ramadan seems to agree substantially with this analysis in his description of "scholastic traditionalism."[128] How do Traditionalist Muslims tend to approach the meanings of the Qur'ān?

If traditional understandings of the Qur'ān hold sway in such societies, it is safe to assume that many Muslims today will approach Christian faith affirmations in similar ways as did the great Muslim exegetes of the past. These ways will be categorically different from the polite conventions of interfaith dialogue in the West. And yet, as Ramadan points out, it is exactly such Muslims, and their Christian counterparts, who need to be engaged in faith conversation.[129]

This necessary conversation will be one in which polemic will be a normal component. People who believe strongly in truth and falsehood will naturally make a case for their confessions. A modernist or postmodern disdain for religious polemic can serve no useful purpose in contexts where people of firm faith need to talk through their differences—not talk around them. These differences of understanding will not be solved by the imposition of the philosophy of religious

---

[127] A. RIPPIN, *Muslims*, p. 192.

[128] Tariq RAMADAN, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 24-25.

[129] T. RAMADAN, *Western Muslims*, pp. 200-201.

pluralism by those who may seek to manipulate the situation from the West. Large communities of Muslims and Christians in the world will continue to make the best case they can for their faith commitments. Polemic will continue. [130] But polemic need not lead to acrimony. Will the partners in the conversation be able to respect each other in spite of their disagreements? The first act of respect for the partner is to acknowledge differences.

According to some of the greatest commentaries of the Muslim interpretive tradition, Muslims and Christians disagree about the concept of God. The question for peaceable coexistence between these communities is whether people of faith will make a link from theological disagreement to antipathy and violence. There is no logical reason for this link, though both Christians and Muslims have found many occasions to make it. Surely one of the most urgent tasks facing these two world communities is to make crystal clear that a link between theological difference and violence is not possible. That these two need not be linked seems to be suggested by the story which a number of the commentators specified as the narrative framework looming over 3.64 and its context in the Qur'ān.

In the story about the Christians from Najrān which Muslim scholars narrated, the strong disagreement over the deity of Jesus does not end in violence. Though they do not submit to the beliefs and practices of Islam to which the ruler of Madīna calls them in the tradition, there is no hint of a military response from Najrān. The Christians decline to participate in the ceremony of mutual cursing which Muslim exegetes understand from 3.61. Instead, the Christians in this Muslim narrative make peace with the messenger of Islam and submit to his rule. Muqātil portrayed their response in these words: "They said, 'O Muḥammad we will make peace (*ṣālaḥa*) with you, lest you attack (*ghazā*) us and terrorize (*akhāfa*) us and dissuade (*radda*) us from our religion, by paying blood money to you of a thousand suits of clothes in Ṣafar and a thousand suits in Rajab, and 30 iron coats of mail.'"[131]

According to Muslim tradition, the Christians from Najrān do not accept the authority of Islam's prophet to pronounce the truth about the deity of Jesus. They are Arabian Christians who simply accept the political terms which Muḥammad stipulates and return to their home with their faith in Jesus' deity intact.

---

[130] Kate ZEBIRI comes to this conclusion at the end of her interesting survey of modern Muslim writings on Christianity, and Christian writings on Islam, *Muslims and Christians Face to Face* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1997), pp. 233-234.

[131] MUQĀTIL, *Tafsīr*, I, p. 282.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary sources:

AL-BAYḌĀWĪ, Abū Sa‘īd ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Umar ibn Muḥammad ibn ‘Alī al-Khayr Naṣīr al-Dīn, *Anwār al-Tanzīl wa-Asrār al-Ta’wīl* (n.p.: Dār al-Ṭibā‘ah al-‘Āmirah, 1887), 2 volumes.

AL-FARRĀ’, Abū Zakariyyā’ Yaḥyā b. Ziyād. *Kitāb Ma‘ānī al-Qur’ān*, ed. Aḥmad Yūsuf Najātī and Muḥammad ‘Alī al-Najjār (Beirut: Dār al-Sarūr, n.d.), 3 volumes.

IBN ISḤĀQ, *Sīrat al-Nabī*, ed. Muḥammad Muḥī l-Dīn ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd (Cairo: Maktaba Muḥammad ‘Alī Ṣabīh wa Awlād, 1963), 4 volumes.

IBN KATHĪR, al-Qurayshī al-Dimashqī ‘Imād al-Dīn Abī Fidā’ Ismā‘īl, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘Āzīm* (Beirut: Dār al-Andalus, 1966), 7 volumes.

MUQĀTIL IBN SULAYMĀN, *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, ed. ‘Abd Allāh Maḥmūd Shihāta (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Tārīkh al-‘Arabiyya, 2002), 5 volumes.

AL-RĀZĪ, al-Fakhr al-Dīn, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb, al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1973), 32 volumes.

AL-ṬABARĪ, Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad ibn Jarīr, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī, Jāmi‘ al-bayān ‘an ta’wīl al-Qur’ān*, ed. Maḥmūd Muḥammad Shākir and Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākir (Cairo, 1955-69, 2nd ed.), 16 volumes (incomplete).

AL-QURṬUBĪ, Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Anṣārī, *al-Jāmi‘ li-Aḥkām al-Qur’ān* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1967), 20 volumes.

AL-WĀḤIDĪ, Abū al-Ḥasan al-Nīsābūrī, *Asbāb al-Nuzūl* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2006).

AL-ZAMAKHSHARĪ, Abū al-Qāsim Jār Allāh Maḥmūd ibn ‘Umar, *al-Kashshāf ‘an Ḥaqā’iq al-Tanzīl wa ‘Uyūn al-Aqāwīl fī Wujūh al-Ta’wīl* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2006), 4 volumes.

Secondary sources:

ANAWATI, Georges C. “Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī.” *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed. B. Lewis et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1965, 2nd ed.), II, pp. 751-755.

ARNALDEZ, Roger. “Les Chrétiens selon le commentaire coranique de Râzî,” in Pierre SALMON (ed.), *Mélanges d’Islamologie* (Leiden: Brill, 1974), pp. 45-57.

AYOUB, Mahmoud M. *The Qur’an and Its Interpreters* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984 and 1992), 2 vols.

CALDER, Norman. "Tafsīr from Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr: Problems in the description of a genre, illustrated with reference to the story of Abraham." In G.R. HAWTING and Abdul-Kader A. SHAREEF, eds. *Approaches to the Qur'ān* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 101-140.

CHARFI, Abdelmajid. "Christianity in the Qur'ān Commentary of Ṭabarī." *Islamochristiana* 6 (1980), pp. 105-48.

GILLIOT, Claude. *Exégèse, Langue, et Théologie en Islam. L'Exégèse coranique de Tabari (m. 311/923)* (Paris: Librairie philosophique J. Vrin, 1990).

GOLDZIHER, Ignaz. "Aus der Theologie des Fachr al-dīn al-Rāzī." *Islam* 3/2 (1912), pp. 213-247.

— *Die Richtungen der islamischen Koranauslegung* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1920).

— "Über muhammedanische Polemik gegen Ahl al-Kitab," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* XXXII (1878), pp. 341-387.

GRIFFITH, Sidney H. *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

GUILLAUME, Alfred, trans. *The Life of Muhammad: A translation of Isḥāq's Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1967).

JEFFERY, Arthur. "Ghevond's text of the correspondence between 'Umar II and Leo III." *Harvard Theological Review* XXXVII (1944), pp. 269-321.

JOMIER, Jacques. "Unité de Dieu, Chrétiens et Coran selon Faḫr al-Dīn al-Rāzī," *Islamochristiana* 6 (1980), pp. 149-177.

MARGOLIOUTH, D.S. *Chrestomathia Baidawiana: The Commentary of el-Baiḍāwī on Sura III* (London: Luzac & Co. 1894).

MCAULIFFE, Jane Dammen. "Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī on *āyat al-jizyah* and *āyat al-sayf*," in Michael GERVERS and Ramzi Jibran BIHAZI (eds.), *Conversion and Continuity: Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands, Eighth to Eighteenth Centuries* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990), pp. 103-119.

— *Qur'ānic Christians: An analysis of classical and modern exegesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

MINGANA, A. "The Apology of Timothy the Patriarch before the Caliph Mahdi." *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 12 (1928), pp. 137-146, 147-226.

MUIR, William. *The Apology of Al Kindy*. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1887.

NICKEL, Gordon. "Early Muslim Accusations of *Taḥrīf*: Muqātil ibn Sulaymān's commentary on key Qurʾānic verses," in David THOMAS (ed.), *The Bible in Arab Christianity* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), pp. 207-223.

— "'We Will Make Peace With You': The Christians of Najrān in Muqātil's *Tafsīr*," *Collectanea Christiana Orientalia* 3 (2006), pp. 1-18.

NICKEL, Gordon, and Andrew RIPPIN. "The Qur'ān," in Andrew RIPPIN (ed.), *The Islamic World* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 141-152.

RIPPIN, Andrew. "The function of *asbāb al-nuzūl* in Qur'ānic exegesis," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 51 (1988), pp. 1-20.

— "Occasions of Revelation," in Jane Dammen MCAULIFFE (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), III, pp. 569-573.

ROBINSON, Neal. "Sayyid Quṭb's Attitude Towards Christianity: Sūra 9.29-35 in *Fī Ẓilāl al-Qur'ān*," in Lloyd RIDGEON (ed.), *Islamic Interpretations of Christianity*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001, 159-178.

WANSBROUGH, John. *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

— *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

ZAHNISER, A.H. Mathias. "The Word of God and the Apostleship of 'Īsā: A Narrative Analysis of Āl 'Imrān (3):33-62," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 37/1 (1991), pp. 77-112.

ZEBIRI, Kate. "Argumentation," in Andrew RIPPIN (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'ān* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 266-281.

— *Muslims and Christians Face to Face* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1997).

— "Polemic and Polemical Language," in J.D. MCAULIFFE (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, IV, pp. 114-125.

Recibido / Received: 09/01/2008
Informado / Informed: 12/07/2008
Aceptado / Accepted: 11/11/2008