

Revisionist Historiography and Christian Attitudes towards Muhammad

Daniel A. Madigan SJ

Much non-Muslim reaction to Islam is grounded in a sadly one-dimensional view of history. It takes what we might call a “Big Bang” approach to Islamic history: presuming that everything from the conquest of Jerusalem in 638, to the sieges of Vienna in the 16th and 17th centuries, to September 11, 2001 is simply the outworking of the initial religious impetus in seventh-century Mecca—a single community with a single vision and single history of aggressive expansion. Much of this is nourished by a tendency even among scholars to study late Antiquity and early Islam in isolation from one another, rather than recognizing the very substantial political and religious continuities between the two. The identification of religion with empire; a willingness to force conversion at the point of the sword; a contempt for the Jews; the belief that all should submit to a single religion—all these elements that one hears criticized as characteristically Islamic—can be found in the Byzantine and Persian Empires prior to the rise of Islam.¹ Furthermore, the demographic movements of the Turkic and Mongol peoples from the East were already in motion before the time of Muḥammad. Those movements eventually overran the Muslim empire, adopted its religion and kept on going. One might well argue that what brought Muslims to the gates of Vienna was not so much the preaching of the much-reviled Muhammad but rather the ruthless expansiveness of a Genghis Khan.

The history of our interactions is also presumed to be always one side against the other. Yet, for example, at the very time Suleiman the Magnificent was besieging Catholic Vienna in 1529, he was also at war with Muslim Persia.² Almost half of the legendary Ottoman army that laid siege to Vienna 1683 in what would become the great symbol for Europeans of aggressive Islamic expansionism, seems to have been Christian, including tens of thousands of Hungarian Calvinists resentful of their treatment by their Habsburg overlords.³ One could easily multiply examples of where *Realpolitik* brought Muslims and

¹ See Jonathan Berkey, *The Formation of Islam: Religion and Society in the Near East, 600–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 10–38.

² For an exploration of the many situations in which Muslims and Christians fought side by side with each other, see Ian Almond, *Two Faiths, One Banner: when Muslims Marched with Christians across Europe's Battlegrounds* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

³ Almond, *Two Faiths*, 174.

Christians into alliances with each other against their co-religionists, even during the period of the Crusades.

Nowhere, perhaps, is a sophisticated view of history more important than with regard to Islam's Prophet. Both historically and in our own time the Christian response to Muhammad—for the most part negative—has been predicated on the belief that we know a great many details of his actual life: his military adventures, his political strategies, even his domestic arrangements. However, in recent decades there has been an important development in the historiography of early Islam which has called into question precisely that certainty on which are based so many Christian polemics against Muhammad. This paper distinguishes among three approaches to early Islamic history, and then considers the question of the extent to which most recent historiography forces Christians to reconsider some of our fixed attitudes to Muhammad.

The first approach to Islamic history is, understandably, what Christians and Jews would recognize as the Muslim community's "salvation history." It is a history that needs to be read as a proclamation of faith rather than a simple chronicle of events. The sheer bulk of historical material of this kind, and the wealth of detail it contains gives rise to a sense that there is little we do not know about the career of the Prophet even down to the most intimate details of his marital relationships. Although it does not find its way into written form until at least a century after his death, this tradition evinces great confidence in the oral traditions that treasured every memory, even the most apparently banal. The best-known of the biographical works is that attributed to Ibn Ishaq (d. 761), though it seems that there are so many versions claiming to come from him that it may be he never himself wrote a standardized text of his *Maghāzī*, a title that indicates his focus was on the Prophet's campaigns. The most common version associated with his name is a later reworking by Ibn Hisham (d. 833 or 828) entitled *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*.⁴ This work has formed the basis for most more recent biographies. It is clear, however, from an examination of *sīra* material over time that this was not just the handing down of eyewitness accounts, but that there was a process of development going on

⁴ Alfred Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad: a translation of Ibn Ishaq's "Sīrat Rasūl Allāh"*, with introduction and notes (London; Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1955). Translations of other classical works of prophetic biography have become available more recently: Rizwi Faizer (ed.), *The Life of Muhammad: al-Waqidi's Kitāb al-Maghāzī* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011) and Ibn Kathir, *The Life of the Prophet Muhammad, volume 1*, translated by Trevor Le Gassick (Reading, UK: 1998). For the history of the genre, see W. Raven, "Sīra" in *Encyclopaedia of Islam* 2nd edition (Leiden, Brill: 1997) 9: 660.

as the tradition sought to cast the Prophet as the culmination of the history of the biblical prophets.

Uri Rubin identifies in the biographical traditions the prominent themes of attestation, preparation, revelation, persecution and salvation, which he sees as characteristic also of the biblical prophetic tradition.⁵ He sees in the development of *sīra* material a movement from a functional notion of prophecy—the prophet is a prophet only when he begins his mission—towards an ontological notion in which the prophet is born a prophet or is even such in pre-eternity, even if he only begins his mission late in life. He further notes a move from a reliance on attestation of the prophet by authorities from the biblical traditions (particularly Christianity) towards attestation of the Prophet more from within the Arabian context, and then even towards a preference for self-attestation.⁶ As the doctrine of prophetic infallibility (*iṣma*) develops to cover not just the delivery of the message but everything about the Prophet's life, so traditions about his early life in pagan Mecca become less acceptable. Interpretations of what the Qur'an describes as his "straying" or "erring" (Q 93:7) have to be interpreted to avoid the notion that he was ever in religious error.⁷

Non-Muslim readers of these biographical works in the modern era found there much about which to be skeptical, but also a great deal they considered reliable and revealing. In their approach to the life of Muhammad, they saw no reason to question the bulk of the political and military aspects of the traditional biographies, even if many might not have been fully convinced of the heroism of the protagonist. They were rather more loth to accept reports of the miraculous or the heroically virtuous, either because those aspects of the Prophet's biography would not have fit their polemical intent, or because such reports were at odds with an approach to historical explanation that set more store by the logic of economics and the insights of sociology than by angelic intervention and prophetic wonder-working.

The generally accepted Western approach follows, for the most part, the chronology of the "salvation history" of the believing community at the same time as it demythologizes it by seeking other explanations for the emergence of a prophetic figure and the elaboration of a new scripture, for the formation of a new and distinct religious community and the rapid expansion of that community not just into the surrounding areas but in quite short order

⁵ Uri Rubin, *The Eye of the Beholder: The Life of Muhammad as Viewed by the Early Muslims* (Princeton: The Darwin Press, 1995).

⁶ Rubin, *Eye of the Beholder*, 21–55.

⁷ Rubin, *Eye of the Beholder*, 76–99.

across a large swathe of the known world. Successive generations of scholars have been convinced that it is possible to sift through the *sīra* material and separate out the accretions of legend, superstition and hero-worship, as well as the retrojection of later developments, in order to arrive at the historically reliable heart of the story.⁸ It is these skeletal remains of the *sīra* that form the narrative familiar to the reader of the majority of introductions to Islam:⁹ the orphaned trader who in his forties experiences a command to recite God's words, and a call to prophesy; the resistance and persecution he and his followers meet in their home town of Mecca because his preaching not only discomfits the wealthy, but also threatens the polytheistic cult of a sanctuary sustained by a symbiosis of trade and pilgrimage; his emigration to a nearby oasis where he is able to transform himself from a prophetic outsider into a leader and lawgiver, from a warner about the eschatological punishment awaiting the unjust and idolatrous to the present instrument of that divine chastisement; his establishment of a power base and a community of believers which forms the heart of a tribal confederation that eventually includes large swathes of Arabia; his triumphant return to Mecca as acknowledged victor and as restorer of the pristine cult of the One God; his death two years later in Medina leaving rather uncertain the matter of succession—an uncertainty that still has profound effects on the Muslim community. Such division notwithstanding, the community he founded, substantially united in a common faith, set out to spread that faith and to bring the world under the sway of God's justice as envisaged and modeled by the Arabian prophet.

Rather than attribute the emergence of a prophet figure of this kind to divine initiative, historians of this second approach have preferred to explain it by positing an economic transformation that ruptured the old tribal solidarities as one group in Meccan society enriched itself from a trade in luxury goods passing through that rather remote town. Muhammad is presumed to be familiar with the prophetic strand of the biblical tradition either through trading journeys north to the Christian heartland of Syria or from itinerant preachers who frequented the seasonal trade fairs in his home region of Hijāz, and so to have

⁸ See, for example, Rudolph Sellheim, "Prophet, Calif und Geschichte: Die Muhammad Biographie des Ibn Ishaq." *Oriens* 18–19 (1965–1966): 33–91.

⁹ Most rely for their material on the works of W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), and *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956). These were abridged into a single volume work *Muhammad Prophet and Statesman* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961). Watt wrote a later work in which he sifts what he takes to be the Meccan sections of the Qur'ān for whatever reliable historical information they might yield. Most of his readers have observed how quickly Watt is reduced to conjecture and speculation. *Muhammad's Mecca: History in the Qur'ān* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1989).

been inspired to respond to changed conditions initially in the manner of an Amos or a Hosea and then after the model of Moses the leader and lawgiver.

Confidence in the fundamental reliability of this second approach to Islamic history has been sapped since the publication in the 1970s of two works by John Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies* and *The Sectarian Milieu*.¹⁰ His rather unorthodox approach—the third we are considering—to the traditional material has been taken up by a number of important scholars in the years since and the fields of Qur'ān studies and early Islamic history have been transformed by the ferment. Wansbrough's proposal that the canonization of the Qur'an should be understood to have taken place toward the beginning of the 9th century in Mesopotamia rather than in Mecca in the few years following Muhammad's death in 632, has come to be seen even by his supporters as exaggerated and scarcely defensible. Still, his work served to upset the settled consensus about the reliability of even the basic structure of the prophetic biography, indeed of the whole Islamic historical tradition of the early centuries.

This third, revisionist approach critiques the accepted Western history by drawing attention to the way in which historians have failed fully to take into account the confessional nature of the *sīra* traditions, and also how late the earliest biographical sources actually are. It has also drawn attention to how late is the material evidence of a distinctly developed Islamic identity, as well as to the ambiguity of the evidence that the initial conquests were motivated by the desire to convert the conquered peoples to an already fully developed new religion. Historians, whether Muslim or not, have often claimed that Islam was born “in the full light of history,” yet the more we examine the sources on which we have been relying, the less confident we can be of that claim.¹¹ It was a claim, furthermore, that presumed naïvely that “history” is objective and disinterested—just the “facts”—yet little attention was paid to the fact that as time went on more and more “facts” about the Prophet seemed to be known.

At its most radical, the revisionist approach will question the very existence of Muḥammad, at least the kind of Muḥammad we know from the *sīra*. Virtually everything is seen as a retrojection of later developments. The approach suffers, of course, from the fact that, on its own admission, it can find very little if any reliable historical material outside the

¹⁰ John E. Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) and idem., *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

¹¹ See F.E. Peters, “The Quest of the Historical Muhammad,” *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 23 (1991): 291–315.

confessional accounts of the foundation of Islam. This school of thought—if we can call it that given that its members often arrive at vastly different and incompatible conclusions—is not in a position simply to replace either the “salvation history” or the standard Western version proposed by scholars like Montgomery Watt with a third, *real* account of the events. What they do, however, is show us a way out of some of the difficulties inherent in those two versions.

In a recent book aimed at a non-specialist audience, Fred Donner has, without joining the revisionist camp about which he has long had reservations, proposed a scenario that envisages a much more gradual emergence of distinct Muslim identity out of a piety movement that was open to and included Jews, Christians and any others who were prepared to affirm the unity of God and the necessity of righteous behavior.¹² Even this relatively gentle re-reading of the evidence provides some space between the Prophet and the development of an identity that defines itself over against other believers. To the extent that it is true, it changes the perspective a Christian has on Muḥammad. In Donner’s reading his movement is inclusive and only in the post-prophetic period does it come to see the incompatibility of the various components of the community (Jews, Christians, and newly-minted monotheists calling themselves Muslims), and the need to distinguish between them. These distinctions would then have been read back into the prophetic career in the development of the *sīra* material.

More radical than Donner’s proposal would be the idea that Muḥammad’s movement was not at all the prophetic monotheist tradition in the Judeo-Christian style that we have come to know. Rather, as Serjeant has argued, Muḥammad should be read as the founder of an alternative Arab sanctuary in Medina that would compete with Mecca (where he had been excluded from power because of his being an orphan) as the center of a tribal confederation, with a system of sacred times and places to govern the interactions of trade, worship and warfare.¹³ His attempt was hugely successful and he was able within eight years to combine the two shrines under his control and begin the expansion of his tribal confederation beyond the confines of the Arabian peninsula in the way we are familiar with. At this point Serjeant’s reading of things would link up with other revisionists. They would suggest that it was only

¹² Fred M. Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010).

¹³ R. B. Serjeant, “Haram and Hawtah: The Sacred Enclave in Arabia,” in *Melanges Taha Husayn offerts par ses Amis et ses disciples a l’occasion de son 70ieme anniversaire*, edited by `Abd al-Raḥmān Badawi (Cairo: Dār al-Ma`ārif, 1962), 41-58.

after the Arabs had come to power in Mesopotamia, in a milieu rife with sectarian conflict among diverse Christian and Jewish groups, that they adopted and developed their own self-assertively Arab version of the monotheist tradition, and tied to the shrines of Mecca and Medina. This line of thought would see the Qur’ānic discourse emerging there in Mesopotamia rather than being brought from the Arabian shrines. Only at this point do the ruling Arabs reread the career of the founder of their triumphant, sanctuary-centered tribal confederation in terms belonging to the biblical prophetic traditions among whom they now find themselves. This would make sense of the origins of the Prophet’s biography in accounts centered on his campaigns and, indeed, bearing that title – *maghāzī*.

Of course, this might seem almost preposterously speculative, and so different from the accepted version that it is not worthy of serious consideration. However, it does illustrate how the revisionist historiography of recent decades can be of service to the Christian engagement with Muslims because in various ways it calls into question the foundational narrative of difference and domination that has gripped us for so long. By challenging our certainties about Muḥammad and the origins of Islam, it opens the possibility of new relationships.

One would be credulous to think that the new relationships will always be positive. There is a very marked tendency in some circles to use the questions posed by revisionist historiography for polemical purposes, to discredit the traditional Muslim accounts of early Islam and to mock Muslim devotion to the Prophet.¹⁴ It is rather naïve, however, for Christians to imagine that discrediting the matter-of-fact historicity of Muslim tradition and revealing it for what it is—“salvation history”—will somehow strengthen Christian positions. Historians, whether skeptical or believing, have not yet finished picking over the historical Jesus or analyzing the development of Christianity. We would be bold indeed to claim that we are on solid historical ground, and in possession of incontrovertible evidence that our salvation history is just “what actually happened.” When it comes to history, neither Muslims or Christians have an open-and-shut case. Each of our communities is making a rather extraordinary faith claims about where and when in our history God’s eternal Word has been

¹⁴ See, for example, the volumes edited by the pseudonymous Ibn Warraq, containing reprints of authoritative articles by reputable scholars whose work is turned to his polemical purposes: *The Origins Of The Koran : Classic Essays on Islam's Holy Book* (Amherst, N.Y. : Prometheus Books, 1998); *The Quest for the Historical Muhammad* (Amherst, N.Y. : Prometheus Books, 2000); *What The Koran Really Says : Language, Text, and Commentary* (Amherst, N.Y. : Prometheus Books, 2002).

definitively expressed. What to most people might seem to be just a first-century Palestinian Jewish carpenter-turned-rabbi is to Christians God's Word made flesh. What to most people might seem to be just the oracles of a seventh-century Arab are to Muslims God's final word to humanity. Looking honestly at our own claims should give us pause before dismiss the other's on "historical" grounds.

What the revisionist approach to early Islamic history has contributed above all is the reconnection of the Qur'an with the late antique milieu within which it emerged, to which it explicitly addresses itself and with which it claims kinship.¹⁵ Even though the earlier stages of Islamic "salvation history" sought to place the Prophet within the continuous history of revelation and prophecy, as the Qur'an itself repeatedly does, later iterations of the history tend to stress his isolation from earlier tradition in an age of profound ignorance (*jāhiliyya*), perhaps in order to underline the belief that his ministry originated not in a tradition he received from others, but in a final divine intervention. This has had its effect on Western scholarship too, and there is still a strong tendency to resist reading the Qur'an and its prophet in the context of the biblical tradition, and thus to privilege the readings of the classical commentators.

At the same time as it brings the Qur'an closer to its late antique background, or "sub-text" as Reynolds would call it, the revisionist approach to early Islamic history distances the text from Muhammad. Whereas non-Muslim approaches have from the beginning presumed Muhammad to be the text's author, much recent scholarship would have us approach it without preconceptions, specifically without the idea of a Meccan author to skew our reading and blind us to other possibilities. To imagine Muhammad as author is also in some sense to think of him polemically as a charlatan, trying to disguise his borrowings and mask his dependence on earlier tradition. Perhaps ironically the revisionist approach brings the reader closer, for a moment at least, to the Muslim reader, for whom too the Prophet has no authorial role, but receives the text in its givenness.

This is not the place to take sides in the debates between those historians who are sanguine about the basic reliability of the Islamic historical tradition and those who insist that

¹⁵ For an important recent attempt to reconnect the Qur'an with its Biblical antecedents, see Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur'an and its Biblical Subtext* (Abingdon, UK, and New York: Routledge, 2010). Another recent work, though with a rather different approach from that of Reynolds, is Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike. Ein europäischer Zugang* (Verlag der Weltreligionen im Suhrkamp Verlag, Berlin 2010).

putting together the details of the life of Muhammad from any of even the earliest biographical works is impossible.¹⁶ Still, Christian response to Muhammad cannot but take into account this scholarship and the caution it urges upon us. Even though revisionist scholarship is still controversial and may sometimes have claimed too much for its positions, it ought nonetheless to undermine our complacency that we know the historical Muhammad sufficiently well to make a sound judgment about him.

If it is the case that we do not, or even cannot, know the historical Muhammad, what have we left? Uri Rubin puts it succinctly when he says that the texts about the Prophet “embody the literary product of Islamic religious devotion.” He treats them, therefore, “not as a door opening onto the ‘historical’ events which are described in them, but rather as a mirror reflecting the state of mind of the believers among whom these texts were created, preserved, and circulated through the ages.”¹⁷ Christian readers will hear in this something like a description of a gospel, and it is not without reason that John Wansbrough introduces the term “Muhammadan *evangelium*” when speaking of the *sīra* literature.¹⁸ So we have moved effectively from the realm of history to *kerygma*.

The significance of this for Christian responsiveness to Muslims should not be underestimated. In many respects we have remained fixated on the *sīra* as proclaimed to us by Ibn Ishaq and others of the early generations as being the truth about Muḥammad. Yet the Muḥammadan *evangelium* continues to develop, even though some Muslims find the Muḥammad of the *maghāzi* (campaigns) literature is still authoritative for them. When Tariq Ramadan writes a biography of Muḥammad and does not make much of the military prowess that so impressed the early biographers; when he makes the treatment of the Jewish tribes of Medina sound as justified as a verdict from The Hague, he is accused of being disingenuous and of manipulating the facts.¹⁹ When a senior Muslim scholar tells a group of students, “As far as we know, the Prophet never killed anyone,” one wants to respond, “Well of course he did!” Yet in both these cases, what is being said about the Prophet is gospel, not chronicle. It

¹⁶ See Rizwi Faizer and Andrew Rippin’s introduction to Faizer (ed.), *Life of Muhammad*, xi–xvii. For a fuller discussion by a more sanguine historian, see Gregor Schoeler, *The Biography of Muhammad: Nature and Authenticity* (New York and London: Routledge, 2011).

¹⁷ Rubin, *Eye of the Beholder*, 3.

¹⁸ Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, 56.

¹⁹ Tariq Ramadan, *In the Footsteps of the Prophet: Lessons from the Life of Muhammad* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). For an example of a relatively gentle critique see “‘Einander kritische Selbstbefragung zutrauen’: Ein Gespräch mit dem Islamexperten Christian W. Troll,” *Herder Korrespondenz* 60.11 (2006): 555–560; also available in English translation at <http://www.con-spiration.de/texte/english/2006/troll-e.html>.

is easy to interpret their accounts of Muḥammad's life and actions as merely the airbrushing of a portrait unpalatable to contemporary sensibilities; yet recent scholarship reminds us that we have no guaranteed access to "what really happened" in Mecca and Medina against which to judge their gospels. What matters is the Muḥammad they are holding up for emulation, not the one that the eighth- and ninth-century Arabs gloried in. This, of course, has been true throughout Islamic history, and over the centuries many biographers have grappled with certain problematic issues emerging from the rather untidy mass of traditions surrounding Muhammad. As Tarif Khalidi points out in his treatment of the biographical tradition, two of these issues exercised biographers even before they became points of polemic from the West: "was Muhammad a violent man, a man of the sword? And was he a lustful man?"²⁰

When Christians speak of Moses we rarely mention (if, indeed we even know) that he believed God was commanding the Israelites through him to slaughter even people of their own families who had worshipped the calf (Exodus 32:26-28) or to utterly destroy any town (along with anything in it that has breath) lest someone try to draw them away from their commitment to their God (Deut. 7:1-5, 16; 20:16-18). Do we recount that he was free to ignore the marriage rules that bound the rest of the people, and that his sister, the prophetess Miriam, was struck with leprosy for criticizing him (Numbers 12 1:9)? No, rather we speak of him as the liberator and leader; the lawgiver and intercessor for his people; the intimate of God on Sinai. Though contemporary Christians might flinch at some aspects of the figure of Moses in Exodus and Numbers, Christians in early Islamic times did not. The Patriarch Timothy I in his eighth-century dialogue with the Caliph al-Mahdi recognized in Muḥammad a quality he saw in Moses—a readiness to wield the sword against idolaters and in service of true worship.²¹

Although the Christian may feel no particular attraction toward Muḥammad, it is in the encounter with Muslims that the question of his significance is most pointedly raised, and not merely because they hope for a recognition of Muḥammad's prophecy that they would see as the just reciprocation of their own reverence for Jesus. The question is this: if I recognize that my Muslim companion is resonating with that same Word I hear expressed in the Cross of Christ; if I see in her that commitment to humble service, to forgiveness, to self-

²⁰ Tarif Khalidi, *Images of Muhammad: Narratives of the Prophet in Islam across the Centuries* (New York: Doubleday, 2009).

²¹ Alphonse Mingana, "The Apology of Timothy the Patriarch before the Caliph Mahdī" in the *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 12 (1928), pp. 137-298.

sacrificing love that God expressed—expressing God’s self—in Jesus, then what can I say has been the role of Muḥammad in that? I cannot deny that my Muslim friends’ sense of divinity and of humanity, with which I resonate so strongly, has been shaped by the figure of Muḥammad. Yet paradoxically this is the same Muḥammad whose preaching called into question not only the significance but even the historical reality of the Crucifixion.

It has often been said of Islam that it is natural religion supernaturally revealed, yet there seems to be something more than that at work in the lives of Muslims. Are we to understand, perhaps, that the Qur’ān, in its calling people back to the monotheistic faith of Abraham and obedience to divine law and the guidance of prophecy, participates in what Christians see as God’s special revelation to Israel, even if it balks at what we would see as the fullness of revelation in Christ? Reynolds’ work on the Qur’ān underlines the fact that the Qur’ān is completely engaged with the biblical and post-biblical tradition, and not insulated from it as so much of the Islamic tradition would like to think. Rather than trying to discredit the Qur’ān as a pastiche of biblical themes and tropes only half-understood, Reynolds credits it both with a fuller appreciation of the biblical and post-biblical tradition within which it explicitly situates its discourse, and also with having more depth and skill in its engagement with that tradition than is usually acknowledged by non-Muslim scholars. He wants to consider the Qur’ān as being in honest conversation with the biblical tradition rather than as simply drawing inexpertly from it—a conversation in which it has its own voice and point of view.

Given the Qur’ān’s engagement with the world of the Bible, could it be perhaps be considered a *praeparatio evangelica* even though chronologically later than the Gospel? The Qur’ān may step back from the affirmations of Christianity, seeing them as exaggerations, but at the same time its own affirmations also license further exploration of the figures of Jesus and Mary. This is a complex question, since there is so much about the text that is explicitly critical of Christian faith even while it immerses itself in the tradition. Some, like the slightly eccentric Italian scholar of Islam Giulio Basetti-Sani, would claim that, far from being a *praeparatio*, Islam is a diabolical impediment to coming to the truth of God revealed in Christ. He cites Iblis from the Qur’ān (15: 39-40) saying to God, “Because You have led me astray, I will make what is on earth seem attractive to them and lead them astray -- all except Your devoted servants.” He sees in this Qur’ānic acknowledgment that Satan could be

leading Muslims astray.²² Yet this seems to go against so much evidence of the goodness of Muslims.

Christians rightly resist a simple parallel between Jesus and Muḥammad and even a comparison of some of their teachings seems to yield little of significance. Jesus was not the bearer of a word from God, as Muḥammad may have thought both himself and Jesus to have been. Christians believe Jesus is himself that Word. The Word we perceive to have been spoken by God in the flesh in Jesus of Nazareth goes far beyond the exhortations and denunciations of even the greatest prophet, John the Baptist. In his comments on the Baptist, Jesus is concerned to show that, for all John's greatness, in his own ministry something new is taking place. The culmination of prophecy in John (Mt 11:13) can scarcely be compared to the ushering in of the Kingdom: "Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he" (Matthew 11:11). What God effects in Christ is not merely the delivery of definitive guidance, a guidance which calls itself a mercy (e.g., Q 6:154, 157). God pays the price of his love and mercy, because genuine love is disarmed before the beloved, and accepts the risk of being wounded.

²² Giulio Basetti-Sani, "Le difficoltà dei musulmani a scoprire il vero Cristo e il mistero trinitario," in *Temi di Predicazione: Omelie* 44 (October–November 2000): 183. This article was originally published in 1996, and seems to be a return to positions he held earlier in his career. He is generally known for much more positive attitude to Muslims.