

## **Understanding Islam** **Series Four: Bearers of the Final Message**

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### **Part Seven: The Islamic critique of Judaism and Christianity**

In Part Six, we saw that four groups are mentioned in the Qur'an under the title of People of the Book: Jews, Christians, Sabeans and Magians but in fact the Magians are only mentioned by name once, in Q. 22:17, and the Sabeans three times, in Q. 2:62, 5:69 and 22:17. There are many other references to the People of the Book and Muslim commentators generally apply them to Jews and Christians. The term is used with this restricted meaning in Part Seven.

There are some fifty-four references to the People of the Book in the Qur'an, the key ones being:

- 2: 105, 109
- 3: 64, 65, 69, 70-72, 75, 98-100, 110-115, 199
- 4: 123-124, 153-159, 171
- 5: 15-19, 59, 65-66, 68, 77
- 29: 46-47
- 33: 26
- 57: 28-29
- 59: 2, 11
- 98: 1-8

At times, these verses are addressed to both Jews and Christians and at others, it is not clear if they refer to one group or both. On a couple of occasions, the content makes clear that one group alone is meant. Q. 4:153-157 are addressed to the Jews, who ask Muhammad to bring down a book from heaven and who are accused of killing some of their Prophets unjustly and claiming to have killed Jesus. Q. 4:171 is addressed to Christians, who are corrected for going to excess in speaking of Jesus as the son of God and saying of God "three."

The thrust of the Qur'anic message to the People of the Book is that there is a continuity in the guidance that God has sent to all Prophets and that the Qur'an comes to confirm the messages that were sent before it [Q. 5:59]. The Qur'an is not a new message but the definitive deposit of the perennial guidance and the criterion by which they can be judged [Q. 2:53; 3:3-4]; therefore it acts as a corrective to errors that have come into the earlier messages over the centuries [Q. 4:46-47; 5:15-19]. At the heart of true religion is a belief in pure monotheism (*tawhid*). This was the faith of Abraham, who was neither a Jew nor a Christian but a believer in pure monotheism (*hanif*) [Q. 3:65, 67-68; 4:125]. This was the faith taught by the Prophets Moses, Jesus and Muhammad. Anything that jeopardises this pure monotheistic belief must be purged as an error in the ways that Jews and Christians have interpreted their scripture [Q. 9:30-31]. The second key belief is that God speaks to humankind through a chain of Prophets, of which Muhammad is the last and the seal [Q. 33:40].

Not to accept any of the Prophets of God mentioned in the Qur'an is an act of disbelief; therefore part of the correction of Jewish faith must be for them to acknowledge the prophethood of Jesus. Both Jews and Christians will only come to true faith when they acknowledge the final Prophet that God has sent [Q. 5:81] and the Qur'an that he received [Q. 3:199]. In these ways, they will have access to the sources that will correct errors in their faith and practice. When speaking of the Jews and Christians, the Qur'an habitually uses a phrase such as "a party amongst them," which thus prohibits blanket judgements and leaves open the possibility that some of them have remained on the paths originally laid out for them by their Prophets [e.g., Q. 3:113-116; 5:66]. Moses, Jesus and all the Prophets were protected from error, so the errors that have crept into Judaism and Christianity cannot be attributed to them but must be due to later generations going astray.

### **Some specific critical comments on the People of the Book**

The Jews and Christians have been careless in preserving intact the Books that were sent to them (*Taurat* and *Injil*). If they had them in their pristine form and consulted them, then they would see that the Qur'an confirms the earlier messages [Q. 6:90-91; 46:12]. This would lead them to acknowledge the revelation of the Qur'an to Prophet Muhammad [Q. 5:19, 41-44]. In some cases, the Qur'an speaks of more than carelessness but rather concealment, the punishment for which will be hellfire [Q. 2:174]. Moses and Jesus laid down a *shari'a* for their followers; the Jews and Christians are told to implement their own scriptures, which would bring them back to this correct path [Q. 5:68]. Had God so willed, God could have made one community of humankind following one *shari'a* but in God's wisdom, God created different communities with their respective *shari'a* so that God might test them concerning the fidelity with which they followed it. All will ultimately return to God's judgement when any differences will be made clear. However, the Muslims are cautioned not to follow other communities by erring from the revelation that has been given to them [Q. 5:48]. This caution is repeated and the People of the Book are reported to be jealous because God has sent a Prophet to the Muslims and are thus eager to lead Muslims astray also [Q. 2:105, 109]. This devious behaviour can lead some of them to pretend to believe whilst secretly raging at the Muslims [Q. 3:119] and making a pretence at conversion so as to destabilise others [Q. 3:72]. The Jews and Christians are required to believe in all of God's Books, including the Qur'an, and not just some of them [Q. 2:89-91] and rejection of them can amount to being amongst those who cover up the truth knowingly (*kafirun*) [Q. 2:105].

### **A complex judgement**

There is a differentiation between the People of the Book and the polytheists when they are defeated in battle. The People of the Book are to be subdued, humbled and required to pay the military tax (*jizya*), whereas the polytheists are to be attacked, besieged and killed unless they repent and become Muslims [Q. 9:5, 29]. In another place, the Qur'an groups together the faithless amongst the People of the Book with the polytheists, who all face condemnation to hell [Q. 98:1-6].

The Qur'an points out that some of the People of the Book are on the path laid out for them by their Prophets and others have gone astray; it is not possible to make a blanket judgement [Q. 3:113-116]. A critical question for Christians would be whether they still believe in the pure monotheism taught by Jesus or have left the path of true faith by inventing a tripartite God of their own imagining.

The People of the Book have the privileged status of being able to share food with the Muslims; their food and the *halal* food of the Muslims is acceptable to both [Q. 5:5]. In the early days of Muslim migration to Britain when *halal* meat was not available, some of them would go to the Jewish *kosher* butcher to buy their meat. Contemporary Christians, who slaughter animals in the tradition way, with the invocation of the name of God and a swift cut to the throat to kill and release the blood, *may* (monotheists?) find that their food is *halal* for Muslims too. The same verse of the Qur'an [Q. 5:5] says that Muslim men may marry women from the People of the Book; thus without their conversion to Islam and on the assumption that they will continue to worship in their own traditions.

In Q. 2:62 and 5:69, those who are on a godly path – the Muslims and the People of the Book – who have faith in God and the Last Day and act righteously will have no fear or grieve, they will receive their reward. However some Muslim scholars have argued that these verses have been replaced (abrogated) by Q. 3:85, which says that anyone who follows a religion other than Islam, it will never be accepted from them. The discussion hinges on the meaning of the term “Islam;” does this indicate Islam as founded on the basis of the Qur'an and *sunna* of Prophet Muhammad or does this have the more generic meaning of *islam*, which is the total submission to God alone and thus would include the People of the Book? The majority of Muslim scholars have taken the former position and said that even though the People of the Book might be worshipping God, their worship will not be accepted from them by God because all worship after the coming of the Qur'an and Muhammad must be offered through the vehicle of Islam, that is, recognising the authority of the Final Message and Last Messenger. A minority of Muslim scholars have taken the latter position.

### **The ambivalent critique of the Jews**

The pure monotheism of the Jews is not questioned in the Qur'an except for one peculiar assertion. In Q. 9:30, the Qur'an asserts that Jews claim that Uzayr is a son of God. This is linked in the same verse to a parallel claim by Christians concerning Jesus. Although four groups are spoken of as sons of God in the Hebrew scriptures (the whole Hebrew people, angels, some Kings of Israel and righteous Israelites – all under particular circumstances) and this is a term connoting special favour in the sight of God, it absolutely does not under any circumstances parallel the Christian usage of the title Son of God of Jesus, which is totally unacceptable to the Jews.

Uzayr is generally held to be a reference to the learned priest Ezra, who was sent to Jerusalem to re-establish Jewish practice after the Temple was rebuilt when the Jews

returned from their exile in Babylon in 538<sup>BCE</sup>. He was the person who made the formal reading of the Torah to the assembled people and once again put its teaching into practice. The Torah is the guidance that leads the Jews on a godly path (thus leading them to salvation) and therefore there could be a linguistic influence here from the Hebrew word *Ozer*, which means saviour. There were Messianic sects of Jews around at the time when the Qur'an was revealed; that is, those who believed that a saviour figure had come. Scholars thus hold that some of the Jews of Madina belonged to such a group and are addressed in this verse. It is as though what is condemned is that both (these) Jews and Christians claim to have “a son of God as saviour” – one group calling him Jesus and the other Uzayr.

Any beliefs that attribute an offspring to God or breach God's pure monotheistic nature are unknown and unsubstantiated by Jewish scholars.

The Qur'an affirms the covenant that God made with the Jews [Q. 5:12] and God is always faithful to covenants [Q. 9:111]. It was however the Jews who broke the covenant and thus incurred God's curse [Q. 5:13]; they turned away from the guidance given to Moses on Mount Sinai [Q. 2:63-64]. Again, the Qur'an does not give a blanket judgement but records that a party amongst them are “an upright group” [Q. 5:66]. Muhammad is told to consult with them concerning the meaning of the Qur'an [Q. 10:94]. Indeed, in the early centuries of Islam, it was common to find scholars consulting Jewish converts to Islam for background information from the Bible about stories mentioned only in outline in the Qur'an; this genre of literature was called *Isra'iliyyat*.

When Muhammad presented himself to the Jewish clans of Madina, the histories suggest that he expected them to recognise his prophethood and join him. However, the Jewish understanding that prophets of God arise from the Hebrew nation did not permit this. The Qur'an affirms that there was originally mention of “the unlettered Prophet” (*ummi*) in the Jewish scripture [Q. 7:157]. Further, the Jews are accused of killing God's Prophets [Q. 2:61, 91; 3:21, 112, 181-184].

Jews are referred to by name in the Qur'an some twenty times (*yahudi*, *yahud*, *hud*, *hadu*) but there are also references to them as the Children of Israel (although this sometimes includes Christians) and collectively under People of the Book. Sometimes the reference has to be inferred by Qur'an commentators. They are accused of arrogance in considering themselves to be pure [Q. 4:49], and in thinking that only they will go to heaven [Q. 2:111]. Further they are accused of believing that they will not taste hell or if they do then it will only be for a short time [Q. 2:80; 3:23-24]. The People of the Book are accused of claiming exclusive rights over the mercies of God [Q. 57:29] and specifically the Jews are charged with saying that God's hands are tied instead of being wide open to all humankind [Q. 5:64].

Q. 5:82 singles out the Jews as being strongest in enmity towards Muslims and they are laden with “wrath upon wrath” for their disbelief [Q. 2:90]. They are accused of taking usury even though it was forbidden to them by God [Q. 4:160-161], on account

of which a party amongst them will be punished, although in the next verse, others will be rewarded for recognising the Qur'an in addition to their own scriptures [Q. 4: 162]. Again, there is never a blanket judgement because some of the Jews (together with Christians) are praised for falling in prostration to God and being moved to tears when they hear the Qur'an recited [Q. 17:107-109]. Muslims are counselled not to take "the wrongdoing" amongst the Jews and Christians as friends for fear that they follow them into wrongdoing [Q. 5:51].

One of the serious charges levelled against the Jews in the Qur'an is the way in which they have discharged their custody of their scriptures, especially the guidance revealed to Moses, the *Taurat*. They are accused of making parchments to display the Torah but concealing much of it [Q. 6:90] and believing in parts but disbelieving in others [Q. 2:85]. Part of the original *Taurat* has been forgotten [Q. 5:13]. Some Jews are accused of perverting the meaning of some words in their scripture and "hearing but disobeying" or "hearing without listening" and "twisting their tongues" around it [Q. 4:46; 5:41]. Even in one place they are accused of writing portions of scripture with their own hands to profit thereby [Q. 2:79]. This distortion of the scripture is known by the technical term *tahrif*, which is applied also to Christians [see also: Q. 2:75; 3:78]. Those who were given the original *Taurat* but do not keep it are likened to an ass that carries books but does not profit from them [Q. 62:5]. Hellfire is promised to those who conceal part of their scripture [Q. 2:159, 174], such references are generally followed by an invitation to repent and be forgiven by God [Q. 2:160].

Needless to say that many of the charges levelled against the Jews by the Qur'an have been disputed as misunderstandings of what orthodox Judaism believes. The importance of a continuity of scripture, which is confirmed by the Qur'an, and the need to affirm the whole chain of Prophets ending with Muhammad lies at the heart of such charges.

### **Critique of central Christian doctrines**

The Islamic critique of Christianity goes right to the heart of its particular doctrines: the Incarnation, the Trinity and the death and resurrection to eternal life of Jesus. It is not the Qur'an's intention to enter into theological debate with Christian theology: Clarify your terms, Explain what you mean by that, Would not this be a more exact formulation? etc. Rather the Qur'an sets out to emphasise clearly its central tenets: the utter transcendence of God (*tanzih*), pure monotheism (*tawhid*), and the creaturehood and prophethood of Jesus. As a pure and sinless Prophet of God, these errors cannot be attributed to Jesus or to the scripture (*Injil*) that was sent down (*tanzil*) to him; therefore they must be errors, misunderstandings or inventions of those who call themselves his followers in later generations. On one occasion [Q. 5:47], the Qur'an refers to the Christians as *Ahl al-Injil* or People of the *Injil* and tells them to judge themselves by its content; unfortunately Christians no longer possess the text of the *Injil* as revealed to Jesus (for more detail on the *Injil* see Series I, Part Four). The Qur'an sets out to correct these errors, not through dispute with Christians but by

stating the truth revealed from God, which must in essence be the same as that which was sent down to Jesus and in all other revelations.

## **The Christians**

There were Christians of various kinds all around the Arabian Peninsula in the time of Muhammad: from Egypt, Palestine and Syria in the north, to Ethiopia in the west and Iraq in the east. On the Peninsula itself, there were Christians in the Yemen and penetrating into the deserts to the north. The Christian writer, Paul of Tarsus, goes into the Arabian desert to make sense of the experience that he had on the Road to Damascus (Galatians 1:17). The Roman Province of Arabia was created in 106<sup>CE</sup> and five representatives from it attended the Council of Nicaea in 325. Hermits lived in the desert and traders and pilgrims would have crossed it; therefore we must assume that some of the Muslims knew the Christians that the Qur'an was correcting. There is indeed an account in the writings of the early Muslim historian al-Azraqi (d.837), although this might be a legend, that there was an icon of Mary and Jesus on the inner wall of the *ka'ba* when Makka became a Muslim city and Muhammad ordered that it should not be obliterated.

In the Qur'an, the Christians are called *al-Nasara*, the Nazarenes, which was a common term for them in Syriac as used in the New Testament referring to Jesus [Matthew 2:23; John 19:19] and to the Christians [Acts 24:5]. The technical Arabic term, *Masihyyun* is not found in the Qur'an. They are corrected in the Qur'an for going to excess and told to stay within the bounds of scriptural truth [Q. 4:171; 5:77]. They are affirmed as the nearest to the Muslims in affection [Q. 5:82], where their monks are singled out and praised for their humility but in Q. 9:31 and 34, the monks are criticised for leading people astray, living off their wealth and barring them from the way of God. Indeed the Qur'an regards monasticism as being a Christian invention without foundation in the guidance of God [Q. 57:27]. Muslims are advised not to take Christians as friends for fear that they would lead them into wrongdoing [Q. 5:51], and they will never be satisfied until the Muslims leave Islam for Christianity [Q. 2:120]. The Christians are praised for having hearts full of tenderness and mercy [Q. 57:27] and promised a double reward from God if they convert to Islam [Q. 57:28]. God has made a covenant with the Christians but they have forgotten part of their guidance [Q. 5:14]. The Qur'an has come to correct the errors that have entered into their doctrines [Q. 5:15-19].

## **Prophet Jesus in the Qur'an**

There are twenty-five passages in the Qur'an concerning Jesus (*'Isa*). Eight come from *suras* revealed in Makka and seventeen from *suras* revealed in Madina; this reflects the growing awareness of Christian presence, especially the Byzantine Empire, in the later period. They are listed here in the generally accepted order of the revelation of *suras*, which helps to make this clear:

### **Makkan**

19: 16-40, 88-95

43: 57-58, 81-82

23: 50

21: 91-93

42: 13-14

6: 83-90

### **Madinan**

2: 87, 135-141, 252-253

3: 42-64, 81-85

33: 7-8

4: 156-159, 163-165, 171-172

57: 26-27

66: 10-12

61: 14

5: 17-18, 46-47, 72-78, 109-118

9: 30-31

The most widely used title of Jesus in the Qur'an is "son of Mary" (*ibn Maryam*), which occurs twenty-three times. There are rare occurrences in Arabic literature when someone is called "the son of their mother" but the obvious meaning here is to emphasise that Jesus has no father as Mary was a virgin and to correct the erroneous title used by Christians "Son of God." On eleven occasions, he is given the title *al-Masih*, the Messiah or Anointed One. His descent from David is not mentioned in the Qur'an, rather he is of the line of Adam, through Noah, Abraham, Imran and Mary [Q. 3:33-34].

There are two accounts of his conception and birth [Q. 19:16-33; 3:42-47] from which we learn that his mother, Mary, was a virgin, who was visited by an angel/spirit messenger from God, who is identified with Gabriel, the angel of revelations [Q. 2:97; 16:102; 26:193]. Mary conceives by divine command and gives birth to him in seclusion under a date palm, being provided with miraculous food, drink and comfort. Mary is referred to as one who guards her chastity and thus there is no suggestion of human, angelic or divine intercourse [Q. 4:156]. God breathed his spirit into her "opening" (*farjaha*), which is generally interpreted as her womb [Q. 21:91; 66:12] although some later commentators have attempted to be more discreet and speak of the angel blowing up her sleeve or the hem of her dress. The emphasis is on the word of divine command and the parallel is with the creation of Adam, who is brought to life by the divine breath/spirit [Q. 15:29; 32:9; 38:72]. The new-born Jesus speaks from his cradle [Q. 3:46; 5:110].

Both Jesus and Mary are spoken of as a sign to people of God's creative power [Q. 23:50], thus, as in the case of Adam and Eve, stressing that God is capable of a miraculous bringing to birth. The same *sura* goes on to mention that God has no son [Q. 23:91] and that there is no deity other than God [Q. 23:117]. Jesus is spoken of as

“a word from God” [Q. 3:45; 4:171 and implied in 3:39 and 19:34]. This is a word (*kalima*) of divine decree; in this instance the command given through the angel “Be” and Mary was made pregnant with Jesus. This is even clearer in Q 4:171, when the word is spoken of as being cast into the womb of Mary. Although his virgin birth is particular, he is not thus to be interpreted as divine but rather a sign of God’s mighty power, which is the case with Adam and Eve, human beings created with no parent at all. The reference in the same verse to Jesus as being a spirit from God is linked with the word that is breathed (breath/spirit being the same Arabic word). Commentators have also seen this as being the spirit of prophecy, which was given to Jesus at his conception but was also given to all Prophets at a subsequent time in their lives.

Jesus is referred to as the servant of God and an exemplar for his followers [Q. 4:172; 19:30; 43:59]. Both he and his mother “eat food,” thus stressing his humanity [Q. 5:75]. As a creature of God, he could have been destroyed at any time had God so willed [Q. 5:17]. He is called a mercy from God [Q. 19:21], a terminology shared with Muhammad [Q. 21:107]. He is called both a Prophet (*nabi*) [Q. 19:30] and a Messenger sent with a revelation (*rasul*) [Q. 3:49, 53; 4:171; 5:75; 61:6]. He will be eminent both in this world and the next [Q. 3:45] and the same verse speaks of him as one brought near to God. Although he is spoken of as a sign to humanity [Q.19:21], he is sent exclusively to the Children of Israel [Q. 3:49; 43:59]. Like other Prophets, he is supported by the holy spirit [Q. 2:87, 253; 5:110].

Jesus is taught both the scripture that was sent to Moses (*Taurat*) and his own particular scripture (*Injil*) [Q. 3:48; 5:110]. He attested the truth of the *Taurat* [Q. 3:50; 5:46; 61:6], clarified some issues that were disputed by the Jews [Q. 43:63] and made lawful some things that had been forbidden for the Jews [Q. 3:50]. Like all the Prophets, he taught the worship of God alone [Q. 5:117]. He also cursed those who disbelieve [Q. 5:78]. He is listed as one of the five “resolute Prophets” sent with a new *shari'a*: Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad, with whom God made a solemn covenant [Q. 33:7 see also 42:13]. However, the Qur'an notes that humankind are to believe in all the Prophets without distinction [Q. 2:136, 285; 3:84; 4:152].

Jesus worked all three of the standard classes of miracles: nature miracles, healing miracles and raising people from the dead [Q. 3:49] but these are all linked in the same verse with being at the command and through the will of God rather than through any power or volition of his own. They are clear signs of the mission of Jesus, accomplished at the divine command [Q. 5:110; 61:6]. He is asked by his followers to ask God to send down a table laden with food from heaven [Q. 5:112-115], which God does and which has been interpreted by the commentators as a reference to the Eucharist but the next verse goes on to stress that Jesus is not divine and not to be worshipped [Q. 5:116]. This verse, which portrays Jesus being questioned by God at the Judgement as to whether he ordered his followers to take himself and Mary as gods beside/beneath God, to which question he answers in the negative, is a caution against excessive veneration of Jesus and Mary in Christian devotion and iconography. It has been suggested that a heretical sect of Christians, the Collyridians, who appear to have taught a threefold god, comprised of God, Jesus

and Mary, is addressed here but against this theory it must be noted that they are not recorded as having penetrated into the Arabian Peninsula.

In three ways, Jesus is particularly linked with Muhammad: both are a mercy from God [Q. 19:21; 21:107] and were surrounded by a group of helpers (*ansar*), both are inspired by God [Q. 4:163; 42:13] and Jesus foretold the coming of Muhammad [Q. 61:6].

In Q. 19:33, Jesus is recorded to have spoken from his cradle and said, "Peace is to me the day I was born, the day that I die, and the day that I am raised alive." As with all human beings, death is inevitable for Jesus as is the resurrection at the end of the world, in which all will share.

The Qur'an speaks of the apparent end of Jesus' earthly life in Q. 4:157-159, in which is recorded that the Jews did not kill Jesus, as they had killed some of the earlier Prophets, "they neither killed him nor crucified him but so it was made to appear to them." A few Muslim commentators have suggested that Jesus was put on the cross but did not die but was taken down alive; a similar belief to the Christian heretical group the Docetists, but the majority of commentators have interpreted this verse to mean that Jesus was never put upon the cross but that a substitution took place and someone else was made to look like Jesus and was crucified in his place. The commentators have suggested a variety of identities for the substitute: a volunteer from the followers of Jesus, Judas Iscariot, who the New Testament identifies as his betrayer, or one of those who was sent to arrest Jesus. This is in keeping with the verse of the Qur'an that speaks of God never failing one of his Messengers [Q. 14:47], thus not allowing such an ignominious fate to come upon Jesus. Q. 4:158 speaks of God taking Jesus up to himself and Q. 3:55 is generally interpreted by the commentators to mean that Jesus was taken up alive into heaven, although some have interpreted it to mean that he was taken up alive and somewhere between earth and heaven his soul was taken from him and then restored to him in heaven. Accordingly, most commentators take the reference to his death in Q. 5:159 as being to his future death at the end of the one and only life that he will resume when he returns.

Q. 43:61-68 is generally interpreted by the commentators to refer to the return of Jesus in the Last Days as a sign of the end of the world. Muslim tradition has it that he will then lead the great battle of good against evil, which will include Jesus correcting the beliefs of those who claim to follow him, in which the forces of good will be victorious and Jesus will rule the world (in concert with al-Mahdi variously understood by the scholars) for a period of time, at the end of which he will experience his one and only death. He will then be buried in the grave space that awaits him alongside Muhammad in Madina. This will be the cue for God to give the order to the angel to blow the trumpet to signal the end of the world when all living things will die. After a bleak period, the trumpet of the general resurrection will be sounded, at which all human beings who have ever lived will be resurrected and appear before God in judgement. In company with the other Prophets, Jesus will act

as a witness at the judgement against his followers [Q. 16:89 but see also 5:117 in which the past tense is used by Jesus at the judgement].

From the foregoing it is clear that no salvific importance is attached by the Qur'an to the death of Jesus. He was neither killed nor crucified by the Jews and there is no reference to his death, entombment for three days and eventual resurrection to eternal life as is commonly believed by Christians.

### **The pure monotheism of Jesus, the son of Mary**

As we have seen [Q. 5:117], according to the Qur'an, Jesus taught the worship of God alone and never told his followers to worship him instead of or alongside God. Jesus is not to be identified with or associated in divinity with God [Q. 5:17, 72]. To call Jesus the son of God is either to call him God or to associate him with God, therefore Q. 5:17 emphasises that he is a creature of God, who God could destroy if God so willed. Any notion of God becoming incarnate in a human being breaks the absolute transcendence of God (*tanzih*), which is central to Islam. The idea of God having an offspring, a son of God, is categorically denied by the Qur'an [Q. 112:3].

Arabic and the Qur'an know of two terms that connote a son: *ibn* and *walad*. The term *ibn* can connote a metaphorical relationship of love and high honour and the term *walad* connotes an offspring. The term *walad* is used fifteen times in the Qur'an to refute any suggestion of God having an offspring; these usages are generally directed against the idol-worshipping pre-Islamic Arabs, who had families of gods in their pantheon, including *Allat*, *al-Uzza* and *Manat*, who were spoken of as “daughters of God.” The idea of God having an offspring (*walad*) is categorically refuted by the Qur'an [Q. 2:116-117]: God has no physicality and no consort and thus cannot be held to have generated an offspring. “Far exalted is God above such things” [Q. 4:171; 52:43]. To generate an offspring requires a pair of equal genus and God is not paired with any creature [Q. 42:11] and thus could not possibly generate a human offspring. The term *walad* is used of Jesus on two occasions in the Qur'an, in both of which it is refuted [Q. 4:171; 19:34-36].

The term *ibn* is used only once of Jesus in the Qur'an [Q. 9:30], which evokes the comment: “That is an opinion that they mouth, imitating the opinions of the faithless of former times.” The statement here is understood to be a reference to the pre-Islamic idol-worshippers and one could also refer it to the ancient Greek gods, who used periodically to couple with human women to produce “sons of the gods.” Any such interpretation is refuted by the Qur'an. Muslim commentators who point to the metaphorical use of *ibn* see it as a sign of high honour conferred on Jesus that has been exaggerated by his wayward followers. This interpretation is substantiated by the following verse [Q. 9:31] in which the Christians are accused of taking their teachers and priests as lords instead of God; it is these Christian scholars who are responsible for misinterpreting the *ibn* in a literal way and thus inventing the doctrine of the divine sonship of Jesus.

The same stress on pure monotheism (*tawhid*) can be seen to underlie the concerns of the Qur'an about any use of three-terminology by Christians. In Q. 5:77, Christians are charged with following the errors of those who went astray in the past. This is held to be a reference to the polytheistic idol-worshippers, who ascribed partners to God (*shirk*). They are told not to go to excess and exceed the bounds permitted by scripture. In Q. 5:73, they are cautioned not to say of God that God is “the third of three” (*thalith al-thalatha*); such would be tritheism, a belief in three gods, and thus unbelief (*kufr*) in the pure monotheism of God. The same rebuttal of tritheism can be seen in Q. 5:116, which records Jesus rebutting the claim of saying that he, together with Mary, is a god beside/beneath God. The oneness of God is again stressed. The third reference makes the case even more explicitly [Q. 4:171]: “Do not say three. Desist!” Again, the accusation is made that this “elevation of Jesus to divine status” is Christian excess and going beyond the bounds of scriptural religion. These references to any three-ness in God have been understood by the Muslim commentators as a reference to and rebuttal of the Christian doctrine of Trinity, which later commentators see as a form of tritheism and violating the pure monotheism of God.

### **In conclusion**

Christians are charged by the Qur'an with going to excess in their understanding of the Prophet Jesus by elevating him in a way that is against the teaching of the Qur'an and thus also contrary to the *Injil* that was given to Jesus, which contained in essence the same message. The charge is laid against Christian leaders, who have fabricated doctrines concerning Jesus that have no scriptural warrant. Further, they have perpetuated a falsehood about the “death and resurrection” of Jesus. In this way, their community has been led into grave and manifest error for which the only solution is repentance, turning to the mercy of God and correcting their beliefs to bring them in accordance with the Qur'an. Christian theologians will want to say that they that they have not gone to excess in their doctrine of Incarnation and that the doctrine of the Trinity does not amount to tritheism but Muslim scholars are adamant that anything that even in the slightest challenges the absolute transcendence of God (*tanzih*) and pure monotheism (*tawhid*) is thus rendered unacceptable and an error.