

On the Presentation of Christianity in the Qur'ān and the Many Aspects of Qur'anic Rhetoric

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Abstract

Many important western works on the Qur'ān are focused on the question of religious influences. The prototypical work of this genre is concerned with Judaism and the Qur'ān: Abraham's Geiger's 1833 *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen*, or "What Did Muhammad Acquire from Judaism?" In Geiger's work – and the works of many who followed him – material in the Qur'ān is compared to similar material in Jewish or Christian literature in the hope of arriving at a better understanding of the Qur'ān's origins.

In the present article I argue that these sorts of studies often include a simplistic perspective on Qur'anic rhetoric. In order to pursue this argument I focus on a common feature of these works, namely a comparison between material in the Qur'ān on Christ and Christianity with reports on the teachings of Christian heretical groups. Behind this feature is a conviction that heretical Christian groups existed in the Arabian peninsula at the time of Islam's origins and that these groups influenced the Prophet. I will argue that once the Qur'ān's creative use of rhetorical strategies such as hyperbole is appreciated, the need to search for Christian heretics disappears entirely.

Keywords

Islam – Christianity – Qur'ān – Muhammad – heretics – Jesus

Western scholars have long attempted to explain the Qur'ān's material on Christianity with reference to the views of Christian heretics. They often begin by connecting some turn of phrase in the Qur'ān's statements on Jesus, Mary or Christians with a certain Christian heresy, and continue by looking through

historical chronicles, or heresiographies, for that heresy in Muhammad's Arabia. This strategy is employed both for passages which express the Qur'ān's own teaching and for passages which condemn Christian teaching. In both cases Christian heresies are imagined to have influenced or informed – or better, misinformed – the Prophet Muhammad.

Research into Christian heresies is part of a larger genre of writing on the sources of the Qur'ān. The prototypical work of this genre is concerned with Judaism, Abraham's Geiger's 1833 *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen* ("What did Muhammad Acquire from Judaism?"). It is worth nothing that Geiger is not particularly interested in the idea that heretical, or better, non-Rabbinic (or otherwise non-standard) Jewish sects might have found their way to Arabia and influenced Muhammad. This idea is found among some other scholars,¹ but it is certainly less common than the idea that heretical Christian sects influenced Muhammad. Indeed the influence of Christian heresies is a motif of Orientalist scholarship on the Qur'ān.

The common recourse of scholars to Christian heresies is connected to the traditional idea that Muhammad preached the Qur'ān in a remote outpost in Arabia, a spot beyond the borders of the Byzantine Empire and thus safely beyond the reach of the imperial enforcers of Chalcedonian orthodoxy. In this vein scholars not infrequently refer to a statement that is (falsely) attributed to Theodoret of Cyrillus (d. 458 or 466) by which Arabia is "haeresium ferax," the "bearer" (or "mother") or heresies. To my knowledge this phrase is not found with Theodoret or any other classical Christian author; even if it were there, the reference to "Arabia" would presumably mean Arabia Petraea – an area well to the north of the Hijāz.

1 C. Rabin, for example, argues: "To sum up, there can be little doubt that Muhammad had Jewish contacts before coming to Medina; it is highly probable that they were heretical, anti-rabbinic Jews; and a number of terminological and ideological details suggest the Qumran sect." C. Rabin "Islam and the Qumran Sect," in idem (ed.), *Qumran Studies*, London: Oxford University Press, 1957, (112-30) 128. For his part Guilio Basetti-Sani argues, in light of the Qur'ān's concern to affirm the resurrection of the body, that the Jews of Arabia were Sadducees. Basetti-Sani, who holds that Mecca, like Medina, had an important Jewish community, writes: "I am inclined to think that just as the Jews of Abyssinia preserved many doctrinal aspects of the Sadducees, so did the Jews of Mecca in Mohammed's day. Although, following the destruction of the Temple in AD 70, the Sadducees lost influence as an organized party, and the Pharisee movement came to dominate all the Jewry of the Talmud and the rabbinate, Sadducee thinking nevertheless survived here and there, and particularly in remote places where the rest of the Jewish communities of the Roman Empire was rare." G. Basetti-Sani, *The Koran in the Light of Christ*, trans. W.R. Carroll and B. Dauphinee (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1977), 30.

Yet none of this has dissuaded scholars much. It is often assumed that the Prophet Muhammad was influenced by Monophysites and “Nestorians” (that is, East Syrian Christians) or by still more exotic heresies, but not by Melkite (that is, Chalcedonian) Christians.² Writing in 1900, the American Protestant missionary Samuel Zwemer emphasizes the presence of heretics in his milieu:

Not only was religious life at a low level in all parts of Christendom but heresies were continually springing up to disturb the peace or to introduce gigantic errors. Arabia was at one time called “the mother of heresies.”³

A second Protestant missionary, Robert Speer, argues that the reason why Muhammad did not convert to Christianity is because he never met true Christians:

When we inquire into Muhammad’s rejection of Christianity, we find that he never had anything but the most perverted idea of what Christianity really was. The Christianity which he rejected was of a very debased type, half polytheistic in its theology, superstitious in its worship, and with a sacred history encrusted with puerile legends. He had evidently never read the New Testament, and his conception of Christ is largely derived from the Apocryphal Gospels. It is not, therefore, historically just to say that Muhammad rejected Christ.⁴

For his part Richard Bell suggests that Arabs are inherently vulnerable to heresies:

2 Most western scholars understand “true” or “orthodox” to mean Chalcedonian. However, some Protestant authors lament the state of Eastern Christianity at the time of Islam’s rise more generally. Often such lamentations are accompanied by a suggestion that Muhammad would have converted to Christianity, if only he had known the true Christianity of the apostles. In this vein W. Goldsack writes, “As it was, the blasphemous extravagances of the Mariamites, Collyridians and other heretical Christian sects repelled the Arabian reformer, and led him to denounce the teaching of these people as nothing less than polytheism. It was Muhammad’s misfortune that he identified this mass of superstition with true Christianity, and thus became the founder of a faith which led back to the legal bondage of Judaism.” W. Goldsack, *The Origins of the Qur’an* (London: Christian Literature Society, 1907), 27.

3 S.M. Zwemer, *Arabia: The Cradle of Islam* (Edinburgh: Anderson and Ferrier, 1900), 306-7.

4 R. Speer, “The Attitude of the Evangelist toward the Muslim and His Religion,” *Lucknow, 1991* (London: Christian Literature Society for India, 1911), (217-51) 233-34.

Arabia (by which probably is meant the Roman province of Arabia, not the land of the nomads) had a reputation in the early Church as a source of heresies. That is perhaps not to be wondered at if we remember that in these regions the Greek and the Semitic mind were in contact, and in a manner in conflict. For the Semitic elements of the Church all along had difficulty in following the subtleties of the Greek intellect.⁵

The Belgian Catholic priest Henri Lammens argues (after an examination of the Islamic sources) that Muhammad's Mecca was home to various Christian heretics who had found refuge or work there, or had been brought to the city as slaves.⁶ A similar historical picture appears in the work of the Catholic theologian Giulio Bassetti-Sani, *The Koran in the Light of Christ*. Bassetti-Sani argues that Muhammad was a genuine prophet, but a Christian prophet who (like the prophets of the Old Testament) did not fully grasp the mysteries revealed to him. In order to develop this argument Bassetti-Sani is evidently obliged to qualify those passages which seem to reject Christian teaching on the divinity of Christ. He does so by insisting that the Qur'ān rejects only *heretical* Christian teaching.⁷

For his part the Swedish scholar Tor Andrae looks to the teaching on the "sleep of souls" of the East Syrian ("Nestorian") Babai the Great (d. 628) in his

5 *The Origin of Islam in Its Christian Environment* (London: Cass, 1968), 20. Later in that same work (p. 158) Bell comments: "It is perhaps unfortunate that the Christian communities with which he actually came into contact were Monophysites who unduly ignored the humanity of Jesus." More recently Irfan Shahid, citing the memorable phrase attributed to Theodoret, defends the idea that heresy abounded among the Arabs, "The Provincia was *Arabia haeresium ferax*, as is clear from the accounts of the ecclesiastical historians." I. Shahid, *Rome and the Arabs* (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 1984), 36.

6 "Il ne peut donc être question d'une chrétienté indigène à la Mecque, si l'on ne consent à donner ce nom à une douzaine de Qoraishites authentiques et de *halif* étrangers affiliés aux clans mecquois, dont les textes nous permettent d'attester l'existence. En revanche, nombres d'esclaves, d'aventuriers, de marchands chrétiens, brocanteurs, débitants de vin, fixés temporairement ou de passage dans la métropole du Tihāma. En majorité des Abyssins, de condition servile, des manœuvres, hommes de peine, ou mercenaires enrôlés dans le contingent auxiliaire des Aḥābīsh, tenants du judéo-christianisme éthiopien. Mais tous demeurés isolés, sans direction spirituelle au point de vue religieux, séparés les uns des autres par les différences de langue, par l'opposition des intérêts, part l'antipathie de race et non moins par les divisions doctrinales, par les nombreux schismes qui déchiraient l'Eglise orientale, vers l'époque où l'empereur Héraclius patronnait la malheureuse combinaison du monothéisme." H. Lammens, *L'Arabie occidentale avant l'Hégire: Chrétiens et juifs à la mecque à la veille de l'Hégire* (Paris: Dar Byblion, 2006), 48.

7 Bassetti-Sani, 30.

examination of the passages in the Qurʾān which suggests that the soul loses consciousness upon death, and only regains consciousness when the body is raised.⁸ He even offers an idea of how Muhammad could have heard of this teaching:

We know that none of the Oriental churches carried on so active a missionary programme as did the Nestorians, who established important Christian churches in Central Asia, India, and China. It is not overbold to assume that Nestorian monks from the Arabian churches in Mesopotamia, or from Nejran in Yemen after the Persians had conquered this country in 597, in the course of their preaching tours among their pagan countrymen, visited Hejaz, with whose capital city the Christian Arabs maintained a lively contact. As a matter of fact tradition tells of a Christian preacher named Quss ibn Saʿida, who is said to have been Bishop of Nejran, but who belonged to a tribe living at Hira in Mesopotamia, whom Mohammed is supposed to have heard preaching in the market at Ukaz.⁹

The point of the present paper is not to prove such arguments right or wrong; indeed, I can think of no way to prove that Muhammad did *not* overhear the preaching of Quss as he strolled through the fair of ʿUkāz one day. I mean instead to say something here about the nature of such arguments. I mean to criticize the tendency of scholars – in Andrae’s time and still today – to seek out Christian heretics whom Muhammad might have met as a way of explaining Qurʾānic material on Christianity. The problem with this habit is not that any particular theory is demonstrably wrong. The problem is that it keeps us from recognizing the rhetorical creativity of the Qurʾān.

8 Evident, for example, in the confusion of the Companions of the Cave who, when they are awoken after 309 years, imagine that they have been “asleep” for “a day, or part of a day” (Q 18:19; cf. Q 2:259; 23:113).

9 T. Andrae, *Mohammed, sein Leben und sein Glaube* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1932); English trans.: *Mohammed: The Man and His Faith*, trans. T. Menzel (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1936), 92. On this tradition see also Lammens, 21. Andrae’s reference to Quss ibn Saʿida might be problematic. The author of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* article under this name writes, “It is not impossible that Ḳuss had relations with the Christians of Najrān, but it is wrong to take him, as has sometimes been done, as the bishop of that town.” Ch. Pellat, “Ḳuss b. Sāʿida,” *EI*², 5:(529-30), 529. Indeed it seems to me likely that (whether or not the tradition Andrae refers to has any historical truth to it) the idea that Quss was a Christian clergyman developed because of the similarity of his (unusual) name to the word *qass*, “priest.”

Scholars who explain the Christian material of the Qur'ān with reference to heresies seem to assume that the Qur'ān is nothing more than a transcript, or record, of the conversations which took place in its historical milieu. Yet the nature of the Qur'ān's rhetoric suggests that it is nothing of the sort. Instead the Qur'ān is a creative work, a work which purposefully exaggerates and satirizes the views of its opponents in order to refute them more effectively.

Qur'anic Hyperbole

A similar perspective on the Qur'ān's rhetoric is suggested by Sidney Griffith in his article, "*Al-Naṣārā* in the Qur'ān: A Hermeneutical Reflection."¹⁰ Griffith's article is in part a response to a common argument in western scholarship on the Qur'ān, namely that the Qur'ān's use of the term *naṣārā* to designate Christians (as opposed to some calque of the Greek *kristianoī*, such as *masīḥīyya*, the term with which Arabic-speaking Christians label themselves) reflects the influence of some sort of Jewish-Christian sect.¹¹ This argument rests in part on the use of the term "Nazarenes" (*nazōraioi* in Greek; *nāsrāyē* in Syriac)¹² in early Christian heresiographies for (supposedly) Judaizing Christian sects. Griffith, however, insists convincingly that the Qur'ān gives us no reason for recourse to early Christian heresiographies in our efforts to understand this term:

10 *New Perspectives on the Qur'an: The Qur'an in Its Historical Context 2*, ed. G.S. Reynolds (London: Routledge, 2011), 301-22.

11 For example: J. Wellhausen, *Reste arabischen Heidentumes* (Berlin: Reimer, 1897), esp. pp. 230-34; W. Rudolph, *Die Abhängigkeit des Qorans von Judentum und Christentum* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1922), 6-8, 90-91; Yūsuf Durra al-Ḥaddād, *Al-Qur'an da'wā naṣrānīyya* (Jounieh: Librairie pauliste, 1969); Abū Mūsā al-Ḥarīrī, *al-Qass wa-nabī* (Beirut: n.p. 1979); French trans.: J. Azzī, *Le prêtre et le prophète*, trans. M.S. Garnier (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 2001); F. De Blois, "Naṣrānī (*Ναζωραῖος*) and Ḥanīf (*Ἐθνικός*): Studies on the Religious Vocabulary of Christianity and of Islam," *BSOAS* 65, 2002, 1-30; J. Gnllka, *Die Nazarener und der Koran: Eine Spurensuche*, (Freiburg: Herder, 2007).

12 The term *nāsrāyē* is not infrequently used by Christians writing in Syriac in quotations of the pejorative manner by which non-Christians (usually Persian Zoroastrians) refer to them. This use is reminiscent of Acts 24:5 (indeed, it might be inspired by this verse) in which the Jewish attorney Tertullus, speaking against Paul, comments: "We have found this man a perfect pest; he stirs up trouble among Jews the world over and is a ringleader of the Nazarene sect." Later Christians such as Epiphanius (d. 403), Theodoret of Cyrrhus (d. ca. 458) and John of Damascus (d. 749) use *nazōraioi* to label "Judaizing" heresies.

Hermeneutically speaking, an important corollary of the recognition of the Qur'ān's intention polemically to criticize Christian belief and practice is the further recognition that in the service of this purpose the Qur'ān rhetorically does not simply report or repeat what Christians say; it improves what they say, corrects it, or caricatures it.¹³

By "caricature" here Griffith means the description of an opponent's views in a way that makes them appear less reasonable. This caricaturing can be found, for example, with the wording, "those who say 'God is the Messiah, son of Mary'" in Q 5:17 and 5:72. Griffith notes that "Christians in the Qur'ān's time did not normally say that 'God is the Messiah.'" However, by describing Christian doctrine in this way the Qur'ān means to make it easier to refute:

The Qur'ān's seeming misstatement, rhetorically speaking, should therefore not be thought to be a mistake, but rather a polemically inspired caricature, the purpose of which is to highlight in Islamic terms the absurdity, and therefore the wrongness, of the Christian belief, from an Islamic perspective.¹⁴

Indeed it seems to me that even the appellation "Son of Mary" is a product of the Qur'ān's creative rhetoric.¹⁵ Christians refer to Christ as the son of God, and

13 Griffith, 311. This, Griffith argues persuasively, is the key to understanding the Qur'anic use of the term *naṣārā*: "Whereas in general the Qur'an displays a high quotient of awareness of contemporary Christian language and lore, and a considerable amount of biblical savvy that allows it to comment on, critique and amplify earlier scriptural narratives, the composer of the Qur'an was probably also well aware of the connotations of the name *al-naṣārā* among Christians and for this very reason uses the name in its text, even putting it into the mouths of the Christian interlocutors themselves, rhetorically precisely because of its potential for suggesting disapproval." *Ibid.*, 314-15.

14 *Ibid.*, 311.

15 On the Qur'ān's frequent use of this appellation Geoffery Parrinder notes, "This is surprising, since Son of Mary occurs only once in the Bible." G. Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur'an* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), 22. The Biblical reference is to Mark 6:3: "This is the carpenter, surely, the son of Mary, the brother of James and Joset and Jude and Simon? His sisters, too, are they not here with us? And they would not accept him" (Mar 6:3, New Jerusalem translation). Parrinder notes that while this term is hardly found in other early Christian writings, it is found in the Syriac and Arabic infancy gospels. To Parrinder this point shows that the Qur'ān's use of "son of Mary" reflects the influence of these gospels: "The Syriac and Arabic usage is further evidence for the belief that Syrian Christian contacts were the closest for early Islam." Parrinder, 27. Now the dating of the Syriac Infancy Gospel is uncertain (the Arabic Infancy Gospel is certainly post-Qur'anic), although it is

the Qur'ān explicitly rejects this appellation (Q 9:30); yet it also insists (against the Jews) that Christ had no father at all (Q 3:59), and so it cannot refer to him as "Son of *his father*". Thus the Qur'ān refers to Jesus as the son of *his mother*, and thereby encapsulates its argument against both Christians and Jews.

Another case of the Qur'ān's creative rhetoric is found in *al-Tawba* (Q: 9) 31a: "They have taken their scribes and their monks as lords besides Allah, and also Christ, Mary's son."¹⁶ Now if we were to examine this verse with a concern to find historical communities that influenced the Qur'ān's material on Christianity we should begin to search for some Christian heretics who worshipped their scribes and monks as gods. We might call them Sacerdolators. Perhaps the Sacerdolators had fled into the Arabian desert where they could worship their monks in peace, far away from the cruel and rigid Byzantine keepers of orthodoxy. Or, alternatively, we could recognize here a case of hyperbole, that in the Qur'ān's milieu no heretical sect of monk-worshippers existed. We could thus recognize that the Qur'ān has a rather skillful way of painting caricatures of its opponents. It is this same recognition that should shape our understanding of those passages which are often assumed to be closely related to Christian heresies.

For example, the Qur'ān repeatedly declares that God would not "take a son."¹⁷ Behind the verb "take" (*ittakhadha*) scholars have not infrequently found a connection with some heresy. Parrinder suggests Adoptionists and Arians:

But for our present purpose the key words are "take to himself any offspring." "Take to himself" means literally to "acquire" (*yattakhidha*), and so this verse denies that God acquires a son in the course of time. This had been said by Adoptionist and Arian heretics in Christianity, who said that Jesus became or was adopted Son of God at his baptism or some other moment. But the orthodox rejected this in teaching that the Son is eternal.¹⁸

often placed in the sixth century AD. See, for example, J.K. Elliot, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: London, 1993), 100. Yet the dating of the Syriac Infancy Gospel would hardly prove a definitive point.

16 Qur'ān translations are from Quli Qara'i unless otherwise noted.

17 Q 2:116; 10:68; 17:111; 18:4; 19:35, 88, 91, 92; 21:26; 23:91; 25:2; 39:4; 72:3.

18 Parrinder, 127.

For his part Basetti-Sani suggests instead “Nestorians,” commenting: “The Koran rejects the Nestorian formulation of the Incarnation (‘to take a son to oneself’).”¹⁹

Yet we might instead understand the Qur’ān’s use of the verb “to take” not as a perfectly preserved record of some Christian group’s doctrinal articulation, but rather as a feature of the Qur’ān’s creative rhetoric. In *Yūsuf* (12) 21 Potiphar’s wife says (regarding Joseph), “Maybe he will be useful to us, or we may take him as a son (*nattakhidhahu walad^{an}*).” In *al-Qaṣaṣ* (28) 9, the Qur’ān has Pharaoh’s wife say (regarding Moses), “Maybe he will benefit us, or we will take him as a son (*nattakhidhahu walad^{an}*).”²⁰ In light of these verses it seems less likely that the language which the Qur’ān employs is a reflection of the Christology of some heretical sect which Muhammad encountered.²¹ Instead this language seems to be part of the Qur’ān’s creative rhetoric. By using the expression “take a son” the Qur’ān implies that the Christians think of God as a woman – such as the wives of Potiphar and Pharaoh – who desired to adopt a child. Christians accordingly appear to be ridiculous, and the Qur’ān’s position on Christ appears to be a more reasonable alternative.

The case of the Qur’ānic verse on the crucifixion (Q 4:157) is different inasmuch as it involves the Qur’ān’s own doctrine, and not a Christian teaching condemned by the Qur’ān. Yet here too western scholars find the influence of Christian heresy. Following Islamic tradition they generally assume that this verse denies the death of Jesus. Having assumed as much, many scholars go on to name the Qur’ān’s teaching on the crucifixion “Docetic,” after an element of the teaching of certain Christian Gnostics in the patristic period who, considering the divine Logos to be above human suffering, insisted that it

19 Basetti-Sani, 29.

20 The Arabic phrase is precisely the same in each case, although Quli Qara’i uses a different English word for the verb *yanfa’anā* in each case; also I have translated *nattakhidhahu* here as “take him as” whereas in these two verses Quli Qara’i translates “adopt him.” On the Qur’ān’s references to God’s taking a son cf. R. Paret, *Der Koran. Kommentar und Konkordanz* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1971), 26, ad Q 2:116f.

21 Cf. also Q 4:125, which speaks of God’s “taking” Abraham as a friend: *wa-ittakhada allāhu ibrahīma khalīl^{an}*.

left the human Jesus before the crucifixion.²² Some even wonder if there were “Docetists” hiding out in the Arabian desert in Muhammad’s day.²³

In fact there is no reason for recourse to Docetism at all, as the Qur’ān never denies (either in *al-Nisā’* (4)157 or elsewhere) that Jesus was crucified or that he died. It states only that the Jews did not kill him (*wa-mā qatalūhu wa-mā ṣalabūhu*), and nothing more. It is possible, of course, to assume that in *al-Nisā’* (4)157 the Qur’ān means to deny the death of Jesus without doing so explicitly. Yet what the Qur’ān says elsewhere about Jesus seems to affirm his death, making God – and not the Israelites – responsible for it. In *Āl Imrān* (3) the Qur’ān has God say to Jesus, “O Jesus, I shall make you pass away (*inni mutawaffika*), and I shall raise you up toward Myself” (Q 3:55). In *al-Mā’ida* (5), the Qur’ān has Jesus (now after his death and ascension into heaven) declare to God, “But when You made me pass away (*lammā tawaffaytanī*), You Yourself were watchful over them” (Q 5:117).²⁴ In the light of these verses *al-Nisā’* (4)157 no longer seems to deny the death of Jesus, either explicitly or implicitly. Instead this verse seems to reflect the Qur’anic teaching that God alone has the power to take someone’s soul from his body: “Allah gives life and brings death.”²⁵

As for *al-Nisā’* (Q 4)157 the focus of the Qur’ān here is on the statement (*qawl*) of the Israelites: “We killed the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, the apostle of Allah.” This is the third of three “statements” for which the Qur’ān reprimands the Israelites in this passage. In v. 155 the Qur’ān reprimands them for

22 On the “Docetic” background of Qur’ān 4:157, see J. Henninger, *Spuren christlicher Glaubenswahrheiten im Koran* (Schöneck: Administration der Neuen Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft, 1951), 27-8; A. Jeffery, *The Qur’an as Scripture* (New York: Moore, 1952), part 4; G. Anawati, “Isā,” *ET*, 4:84a and more recently S.K. Samir, “The Theological Christian Influence on the Qur’an: A Reflection,” *The Qur’an in Its Historical Context*, ed. G.S. Reynolds (London: Routledge, 2008), (141-62) 153ff.; C. Gilliot, “The ‘Collections’ of the Meccan Arabic Lectionary,” *The Transmission and Dynamics of the Textual Sources of Islam. Essays in Honour of Harald Motzki*, ed. N. Boekhoff-van der Voort, K. Versteegh & J. Wagemakers (Leiden: Brill, 2011), (105-33) 126. Samir writes, “All of the western commentators conclude that the theory of the substitution of Christ on the Cross derives from Docetism” (p. 153). The English language *Wikipedia* site devotes a section of the article “Docetism” (as of February 2014) to Islam, with the note: “The Qur’ān has a docetic or gnostic Christology.”

23 On this see H. Grégoire, who suggests that Muhammad might have been influenced by “docetic Monophysites.” H. Grégoire, “Mahomet et le monophysisme,” *Mélanges Charles Diehl* (Paris: Leroux, 1930), 1:107-19.

24 My translation. Quli Qara’i renders *tawaffā* differently here: “taken me away.” On the question of Jesus’ death in the Qur’ān see G.S. Reynolds, “The Muslim Jesus: Dead or Alive?” *BSOAS* 72 (2009), 237-58.

25 Q 3:156; cf. 2:158; 7:158; 9:116, *passim*.

their statement, “Our hearts are uncircumcised” and in v. 156 for their statement “against Mary” (v. 156). The statement on the Crucifixion in v. 157 is meant to show that the Israelites have moved so far away from God that they even rejoice in the notion of killing of one of His prophets. There is, then, no reason to assume that the Qur’ān denies the death of Jesus, and *a fortiori* to imagine that the Qur’ān was influenced by Christian Docetists on the question of the Crucifixion.

With this we might turn to the case of *al-Mā’ida* (5) 116:

And when Allah will say, ‘O Jesus son of Mary! Was it you who said to the people, “Take me and my mother for gods besides Allah”?’ He will say, ‘Immaculate are You! It does not behoove me to say what I have no right to [say]. Had I said it, You would certainly have known it: You know whatever is in myself, and I do not know what is in Your Self. Indeed You are knower of all that is Unseen.

The manner in which the Qur’ān has Jesus deny that he ever told people, “Take me and my mother for gods besides Allah” has long led western scholars to imagine that the Prophet had a mistaken idea of the Trinity, that he imagined the Christian Trinity to be a family: Father, Mother, Son.²⁶

Some scholars justify this idea with reference to the *Panarion* of Epiphanius’ (d. 403), a Christian heresiography which includes a sect named the “Collyridians,” so called – according to Epiphanius – because they liked to baked cakes (*kollurida*) for the Virgin Mary. The Collyridians, Epiphanius explains, were made up of women in “Arabia” who “decorate a barber’s chair or a square seat, spread cloth on it, set out bread and offer it in Mary’s name on a certain day of the year” (VII:1,6).²⁷ Somehow, according to the scholars who rely on such reports, Muhammad met or heard of these Collyridians and got

26 On this see Rudolph, 87. Blachère is more reticent about this idea: “Blachère: “Si l’on rapproche le présent vt. du vt. 116, on constate que la Trinité dont l’existence est ici niée se compose de Dieu, de Jésus et de Marie, laquelle se trouve substituée à l’Esprit Saint. La condamnation porté par le Coran vise donc une secte dont la doctrine est prise pour celle de toute le Chrétienté. Sayous a émis l’hypothèse qu’il s’agit d’une secte trithéiste ayant peut-être repris, sous une forme plus ou moins déformée, certaines idées de Jean Philopon (début du VIe s. J.-C.). Mais peut-être faut-il songer plus simplement à la place éminent occupée par Marie, dès le haut Moyen Age, dans la dévotion des Chrétiens d’Orient.” *Le Coran* (Paris: Besson & Chantemerle, 1957), 144, n. 77 (ad Q 5:77).

27 *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis*, trans. F. Williams (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 621. Epiphanius adds (VI:2,2), “The speculation is entirely feminine, and the malady of the deluded Eve all over again.”

the idea that Christians generally worship Mary. This led him to imagine that they think of Mary as the third member of the Trinity.²⁸ On the Collyridians Bell comments:

In later times we hear of other kinds of heretics, the Collyridians, and a class of idolatrous worshippers of the Virgin Mary. Our information about these is very meagre, if indeed what we have is not due to Epiphanius' imagination. It is possible, however, that some of the heretical movements persecuted in the Empire may have sought refuge in Arabia and helped to form the soil out of which Islam grew.²⁹

Francois de Blois resists the temptation to explain *al-Mā'ida* (5)16 in light of the Collyridians, yet he does so not because of any methodological problem with the notion of seeking out heretical sources for the Christian material in the Qur'ān. He does so because he is not satisfied that he has found the right heresy, and he goes on to look for another.³⁰

Scholars like de Blois who would take us on a quest for heretical Christian sects seem to neglect the possibility that the Qur'ān has the ability to produce creative rhetoric, to satirize the views of its opponents, or to employ particular turns of phrase which are something more than simple recordings of its sources or its doctrine. In the case of *al-Mā'ida* (5) 16, for example, could it be that the Qur'ān is taunting Christians by intentionally exaggerating their

28 Zwemer (pp. 306-7) comments, "The most flagrant example was that of the Collyridians, in the fourth century, which consisted in a heathenish distortion of mariolatry. Cakes were offered to the Holy Virgin, as in heathen times to Ceres." The Jewish scholar Gustav Weil has a similar perspective on the Collyridians: "Many heresies respecting the Trinity and the Savior, the worship of saints and images, errors on the future state of the soul, etc., had so completely overrun the nominal church of that country, that it is difficult to say whether one particle of truth was left in it. More especially the worship of Mary as the mother of God, whom the Marianites considered as a divinity, and to whom the Collyridians even offered a stated sacrifice, was in general practice round Mohammed." G. Weil, *The Bible, the Koran, and the Talmud or Biblical Legends of the Musselmans* (New York: Harper, 1846, 256). Cf. also Parrinder, 135.

29 Bell, 20.

30 "There is no indication that these people regarded Mary as part of a trinity, or that they saw her as god's consort. Moreover, since nothing seems to link these female devotees to 'Jewish Christianity', the hypothetical localization of Collyridians in seventh century Ḥijāz does not help us with the identification of the quranic *naṣārā*. I should like therefore to follow a different trail, one which leads directly to the Nazoraeans of Christian heresiographers." "Naṣrānī and Ḥanīf: Studies on the religious vocabulary of Christianity and Islam." *BSOAS* 65 (2004) (1-30), 14.

devotion to Mary? Could this verse be more about the Qur'ān's creative rhetoric and less about the Collyridians?

That the Qur'ān has a penchant for such creative rhetoric is evident in certain passages on divine judgment. In *al-Tawba* (9) 34, for example, the Qur'ān asks its prophet to "Give the 'good' news of a painful punishment" to the unbelievers. In *al-Dukhān* (44) 49, the Qur'ān has God say to a damned soul in hell, "You are indeed the powerful and noble one!"³¹ The Qur'ān here is not reporting that the condemned – who after all suffer humiliating punishments – are powerful and noble. Instead the Qur'ān is employing irony. One might find irony, too, in the description of hell as a "bed" (*mihād*) for the unbelievers in *al-A'rāf* (7): 41.

In reading the Qur'ān we should generally be sensitive to its creative use of rhetorical tools such as irony and hyperbole. The Qur'anic material on Christianity is a testament to this creativity, and not to the influence of Christian heretics.

31 For this point I am indebted to Prof. Devin Stewart who shared with me a draft of his paper, "Poetic License and the Qur'anic Names of Hell: The Treatment of Cognate Substitution in al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī's Qur'anic Lexicon."