

## **Mark Durie's Response to Corrie Jonn Block's "Competing Christian Narratives on the Qur'an"**

- Corrie's text doesn't distinguish anywhere near carefully enough between diachronic explanations and synchronic functions of texts. Diachrony ('through time') is about how something got to be what it is. Synchrony ("with/together time") is about how it functions in a single point of time, within a living structural system. Corrie fails to grasp the significance of the difference between the two as two completely different modes of explanation. Much of what Corrie is concerned with is textual paleontology [diachrony] - discerning possible influences in the prehistory of the text. It's about finding fossils in text. This is not a good way of determining what a text means for its consumers at the time of its creation. It does not explain the text as a meaningful linguistic sign, but only as an artefact of historical processes. This is akin to the difference between meaning and etymology.
- The use of the term 'subtext' is a symptom of this. On literary theory, 'subtext' refers to an intentional meaning inherent in a text, which is not expressed overtly. However Gabriel Said Reynolds and Corrie use the term to refer to palentological layers in a text, which need not actually determine its meaning as a text-produced-and-used-in-time. This approach is akin to what De Saussure famously criticized as the 'philological' study of language. Much of the previous research on language during the 19th century had been philological and De Saussure's work marked a profound watershed in understanding of how language works and how it needs to be investigated.
- I experienced a frustrating tension in Corrie's work. On the one hand what he describes as his 'objective, humble and orthodox' view is contrasted to what is implied or stated to be the subjective, arrogant positions of others. He seeks to be an ecumenist towards Islam, but is a polemicist against the positions of some Christians.
- I have trouble reconciling the 'objective' label with the large number of tentative, probabilistic modal hedging statements. I find a great deal of subjectivity in his observations. This is frustrating at times, as it is hard to follow what he actually believes to be the case, and the many 'maybes' he floats. This is not an argument against what he is saying, but an expression of frustration about the difficulty of knowing exactly what he does or does not believe.
- Corrie pointed out that 'anointed one' is one of the many meanings suggested in Qur'anic commentaries. I agreed 150%, but my point is that it is irrelevant to Qur'anic theology what Al-Masih means. (And as a secondary point, the word is grammatically unanalyzable in Qur'anic Arabic: it fits into no regular pattern of derivation. This is why there are so many etymologies suggested by the commentators.)
- While Corrie's stated methodological preference is not to impose alien frames on the Qur'an, I found that he does not always follow his own principles, and can at times impose heavy framing upon its text. One example is reference to the phrase '99 names of God' in connection with discussions about the Trinity, and the Qur'an's naming of Allah. This phrase is not Qur'anic. Another example (which I didn't mention in the live discussion) is his preference for the term 'lesser jihad' to refer to jihad fi sabi Allah, as referenced in the Qur'an. Yet this terminology and the contrast with the 'greater jihad' comes from an unreliable and discredited hadith dating centuries after Muhammad (and Corrie discounts the hadiths in general). Then there is his dismissal of the hadiths as an interpretive grid for the Qur'an, despite the fact

that the Qur'an itself repeatedly upholds the supremacy of the Sunna. (See below for just some of the verses from the Qur'an which address this — from my book *The Third Choice*, pp.23-24). Muslim theologians' reading of the Qur'an in the light of the hadiths has been in fact strongly influenced by their desire to put the text in its proper context, in accordance with the principles the Qur'an gives for its own interpretation: the integrity of that effort does not seem to be respected by Corrie.

- Corrie's text relies upon verses from the Qur'an which uphold the testimony of the People of the Book as an authoritative framework for interpreting the Qur'an. However this seems to overlook the polemical and supersessionist stance of the Qur'an towards the People of the Book, including the view that the 'Books' no longer actually exist in authentic form, as they have been corrupted. There is also a whole host of anti-Jewish passages in the Qur'an, which include accusations that the text of the Bible has been deliberately changed, that the People of the Book lie about the truth etc. etc. I think the traditional Islamic view, that while the Books of Jews and Christians existed once, they no longer exist today, and truly genuine Jews and Christians will embrace Muhammad as a prophet, is a more authentic and respectful interpretation of the Qur'an's overall message about Jews and Christians and their books.
- Moreover the Qur'an's affirmations of the validity of the testimony of the People of the Book - even ignoring the contrary statements, which are very weighty and more extensive - are considerably weaker than its affirmations of the authority of the Sunna, which, as noted above, Corrie's text seems to overlook. A truly respectful and balanced reading of the Qur'an would give greater weight to the Sunna than to the remnants of the Books in the hands of Jews and Christians today.
- I think Corrie asked me about Jewish attitudes to the New Testament. My comment is that while Judaism regards New Testament Messianism as discontinuous with Biblical faith (i.e. the NT is a discontinuous addition to the Jewish scriptures), I am a Christian and as such I do hold the traditional Christian view that Christianity was a continuous development out of the Judaism of Jesus' time. I see a great contrast between the relationship of Christianity to Judaism with the relationship of Islam to the Biblical Faiths. (I also acknowledge that the Qur'an sees Islam as a continuous development with Biblical faiths, but only through a supersessionist frame: see points immediately above.)
- Corrie's text seems to regard 'dialogue' as the main game. E.g. he referred to the Gospel of Barnabas as 'hijacking' the dialogue. When and why was 'dialogue' ever the main game?
- A related concern is how Corrie sees mission - his comments in discussion helped me understand this better, but I still wonder how he integrates his understanding of mission with being an ecumenist. This is not a criticism, but a difficulty I have in understanding him.
- I remarked that we sorely need a Qur'anic theology to be formulated that takes the Qur'an seriously and interprets it in its own terms.
- The issue of an Islamic Reformation came up. The Latin expression *reformatio* referred throughout the Middle Ages to the prestigious idea that Christianity should be renewed by restoring it to its origins. (Cf. the *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, article entitled 'Reformation'). This is a very different understanding of 'reformation' to what is commonly understood by secular people today. In this, its original sense, the outcome of the long-standing modern Islamic reformation is already apparent, and it is the Muslim Brotherhood, Al Qaida, ISIS, Boko Haram, etc.

- Something which I didn't mention is that Rick Oakes' recent Edinburgh PhD dissertation – *The Cross of Christ: Islamic Perspectives* – finds that Muslim commentators who entertained the possibility that Jesus died on the cross in fact all clearly reject this interpretation. They entertained it in the same sense that I have entertained the possibility that the Qur'an is a true revelation from God. (Oakes refutes Todd Lawson's 2009 book, as well as the tentative suggestions in Joseph Cumming's 2001 Yale dissertation proposal.) So the vast majority of Islamic views about the crucifixion are a poor candidate for common ground with Christianity.
- I was grateful to Dudley Woodberry for pointing out to me that my discussion of final paragraphs of his article on 'common pillars' did not do justice to the main thrust of his argument. I acknowledge this and will be glad to correct my writings on this in future.
- I also noted, in response to John Azumah, that my missiological practice of inviting people to renounce Islam, Muhammad, etc. was a concluding remark in my paper, but not a conclusion that I came to based upon the arguments I put forward about the relationship of the Qur'an to the Bible. My point was rather that one's attitude to the Qur'an is not unrelated to, and indeed will tend to be correlated with one's missiological practice.
- I experience Corrie's use of the word 'ecumenism' as confusing, because the term's current core meaning is in reference to an inclusive understanding of world-wide Christian unity. Thus *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines it as 'the movement of tendency toward worldwide Christian unity or cooperation.' To use this term in reference to the Qur'an and the Bible implies that Islam and Christianity are one spiritual family, and different manifestations of a unitary religion. It implies that Corrie sees Christianity and Islam as one faith community. I understand that there are broader metaphorical uses of this term, but to use it this way is to invite misunderstanding. (This use of the term feels quite Islamic, because Islam sees Christianity as a derivative of Islam. The term 'ecumenism' points to an Islamic unity binding the Qur'an and the Bible together: in much the same way the phrase 'Abrahamic religion' also implies an Islamic synthesis of Islam, Christianity and Judaism.)
- Someone in the meeting suggested that the important thing is that people are coming to Christ through the Qur'an. I agree that God can use the Qur'an to lead people to Christ. There is a testimony to Christ in the Qur'an which has opened the hearts of many Muslims to the Gospel. Absolutely! BUT this does not negate the need to understand the Qur'an in its own terms, and to inquire into its origins. Also it is important to acknowledge that the Qur'an can also equally lead people away from Christ, and towards hatred of Christians and Christianity. E.g. the Albanian leader of ISIS was recently filmed quoting the example of Abraham "We say to you as Ibrahim said to his father: "Verily we are free from you and whatever you worship besides Allah. We have rejected you, and there has started between us and you hostility and hatred forever, until you believe in Allah alone." (Sura 60:3) (He went on to cite the hadiths in a more explicit vein, referring to Muhammad's words to the Meccans before his hijrah: 'we bring you nothing but slaughter', and this is absolutely intended in obedience to the commands in the Qur'an to submit to the Sunna of Muhammad. My understanding is that when Muslims turn away from Islam, they are become aware of the Christ-shaped hole in their hearts, and this awareness is shaped and influenced by Islam, even as they walk out of it.

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"The Qur'an on the Sunna" (from *The Third Choice* by Mark Durie)

Muhammad's instructions are Allah's guidance for the faithful:

O believers, obey Allah, and obey the Messenger ... (Q4:59)

Whosoever obeys the Messenger, thereby obeys Allah ... (Q4:80)

Allah guides whomsoever he will to a straight path.

They say, 'We believe in Allah and the Messenger, and we obey.' (Q24:46-47)

Say: 'Obey Allah and obey the messenger.' ... If you obey him, you will be guided. (Q24:54)

It is not for any believer, man or woman, when Allah and His Messenger have decreed a matter, to have the choice in the affair. Whosoever disobeys Allah and His Messenger has gone astray into manifest error. (Q33:36)

No one is a believer until they willingly submit to Muhammad's guidance:

... they will not believe till they make thee [Muhammad] the judge regarding the disagreement between them, then they shall find in themselves no impediment touching thy verdict, but shall surrender in full submission. (Q4:65)

Those who follow Muhammad will be successful:

Whoso obeys Allah and His Messenger, and fears Allah and has awe of Him, those – they are the triumphant. (Q24:52)

They will also be counted among the blessed:

Whosoever obeys Allah, and the Messenger – they are with those whom Allah has blessed ... (Q4:69)

Muhammad's manner of life is exemplary:

You have had a good example in Allah's Messenger for whosoever hopes for Allah and the last Day, and remembers Allah oft. (Q33:21)

His moral character is most powerful:

... thou art not, by the blessing of the Lord, a man possessed. ... surely thou art upon a mighty morality ... (Q68:1-4)

He is not subject to deception or error:

By the Star when it plunges, your comrade is not astray, neither errs, nor speaks he out of caprice. (Q53:1-3)

Opposing Muhammad's instruction and example is disbelief or *kufr*. This leads to a terrible fate, in this life and the next, a matter about which people are warned most severely:

But whoso makes a breach with the Messenger after the guidance has become clear to him, and follows a way other than the believers', him We shall turn over to what he has turned to and We shall roast him in hell – an evil homecoming! (Q4:115)

... so confirm the believers. I shall cast into the unbelievers' hearts terror; so smite above the necks, and smite every finger of them! That, because they had made a breach with Allah and with His Messenger;

and whosoever makes a breach with Allah and with His Messenger, surely Allah is terrible in retribution. (Q8:12-13)

Whatever the Messenger gives you, take; whatever he forbids you, give over [i.e. abstain]. And fear Allah; surely Allah is terrible in retribution. (Q59:7)

And whoso rebels against Allah and His Messenger, for him there awaits the fire of Hell; therein they shall dwell forever. (Q72:23)