

# PROPHETS MUHAMMAD AND JESUS: MODELS AND INTERPRETERS OF SCRIPTURE – A COMPARATIVE STUDY

Wilhelmus G.B.M. Valkenberg\*

**Abstract:** This article reflects on the possibility of comparing the role of Prophet Muḥammad for Muslims and the role of Jesus Christ for Christians as models and interpreters of Scripture. It discusses texts by Said Nursi about Prophet Muḥammad as interpreter of the Qur’ān, and texts from the New Testament about Jesus as interpreter of the Jewish scriptures.

**Keywords:** *Scripture, Muhammad, Jesus, interpretation, Said Nursi, New Testament*

In the context of this special edition on *Said Nursi and Prophethood*, I want to engage in a comparative study of the functions of two prophets in their relationship to God’s revelation. I want to focus on the role of Prophet Muḥammad for Muslims, and Jesus Christ for Christians, not only as models for living according to this revelation, but also as interpreters of the revelation they received from God. In the first section I will reflect on the possibilities and limits of such a comparison, since we all know that Muḥammad and Jesus Christ do not have the same function for Muslims and Christians respectively; therefore, such comparisons always fall short of the realities they try to describe. In the second section I will discuss a few texts in which Said Nursi talks about Prophet Muḥammad as interpreter of the Qur’ān, and in the final section I will focus on Jesus Christ as interpreter of Scripture in the Christian New Testament.

## THE LIMITS OF COMPARISONS: TWO WORDS, TWO INTERPRETERS

When we want to compare elements from two different religions, we need to be careful not to compare elements that seem to be very similar but in fact are not. A case in point would be to compare Prophet Muḥammad receiving the revelation of the Qur’ān with Prophet ‘Isa receiving the revelation of the Injīl. This might be a correct comparison from the point of view of Islamic tradition in interpreting the Qur’ān, but it is not correct from the point of view of Christian theology. Christians would not agree with such a comparison for two reasons.

In the first place, they would say it is possible to see Jesus Christ as a prophet, but such a point of view fails to appreciate what is essential about Jesus for Christians, viz. that he is more

---

\* Pim (Wilhelmus G.B.M.) Valkenberg is Professor of Religion and Culture at the School of Theology and Religious Studies, The Catholic University of America, Washington D.C. Recent book publications: *World Religions in Dialogue* (2013); *Renewing Islam by Service* (2015); and *Nostra Aetate: Celebrating 50 years of the Catholic Church’s Dialogue with Jews and Muslims* (2016).

than a prophet of God, because He is identified with God as one of the three persons of the Trinity. In other words: it is certainly possible to see Jesus as a prophet, but it is not enough.

In the second place, they would also say that Jesus Christ is not at the receiving end of revelation, but He is the Word of God in which God reveals not a scripture but Godself, and the writings of the New Testament give testimony of this revelation. So, Christians would say that Jesus is not the addressee of God's revelation, but rather the embodiment of this revelation and, indeed, the revelation of God itself. Therefore, the difference between Islam and Christianity can be summarised – and has often been summarised – in the saying, where in Islam it is the Qur'ān that is God's Word, in Christianity it is not a scripture but a human being that is God's Word.

This of course raises an important question: if the difference between Islam and Christianity is so essential, doesn't that preclude making the sort of comparisons that I intend to make? Once again, from the perspective of the Qur'ān, there seems to be a basic possibility of comparing 'Isa and Muhammad as prophets, since they are two prophets in a whole series of prophets to whom God has revealed God's guidance for humankind, Muhammad being the last of the prophets and therefore the most important one. But is it possible to have a similar approach in Christianity? Doesn't the central confession of Jesus Christ as the Son and Word of God exclude the possibility of talking about him as a prophet?

I think this need not be the case. It is possible for a Christian to talk about Jesus Christ as a prophet in the same way in which it is possible to talk about him as a teacher or a model of spirituality. For most Christians, such a way of talking would be insufficient, but it would not be impossible *per se*. According to this way of speaking, it is also possible to compare him to other prophets such as Abraham or Elijah or even Muhammad. This is possible because most Christians would see Jesus as a person who has a human nature and at the same time is divine. So, according to his human nature, Jesus can be compared to other human beings. Yet, according to his divine nature, He is different from all creatures and therefore incomparable. But still, it is possible and even valuable to talk about him as a human being. There are two reasons for this. In the first place, belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ has tended to overshadow belief in his humanity to such an extent that Christians often have not paid enough attention to the fact that Jesus Christ was a human being, "with sand in his sandals" as one of my teachers used to say. In the second place, attention to the historical reality of the humanity of Christ has brought home to Christians the fact that Jesus was not a Christian but a Jew, as Paul says introducing Jesus as "son of David according to the flesh" (Romans 1:3). Moreover, this Jesus followed the Jewish *halakha* or way to observe the Torah. Accordingly, early Christians were described as men and women "who belonged to the Way" (Acts 9:2), which refers to the specific mode of observing the *halakha* following Jesus. After the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) and its important declaration *Nostra Aetate* about the relationship between the

Church and other religions, it has become important for Catholics to re-discover this Jewish dimension of Jesus as a human being.<sup>1</sup>

If we look at Jesus in this manner as a follower of the Jewish way to obey God's guidance in the Torah, it becomes possible to see there is a succession of Scriptures containing God's guidance for humankind in both religions. In Islam, there is a series of prophets and messengers to whom God gave this guidance in the Tawrāt, Injīl and finally, endorsing and validating them all, the Qur'ān.<sup>2</sup> In Christianity the succession is not primarily focused on a series of prophets, but on a series of covenants in which God entered into a relationship first with the Jewish people and later with the community of Christians through the revelation in Jesus Christ to which the scriptures of the New Testament bear witness. In both cases there is a form of what theologians call "supersessionism" according to which the new revelation supersedes (but does not invalidate) the old revelation. Yet in the two traditions supersessionism works somewhat differently. The Christians keep the testimonies of the first covenant, but subordinate them as an "Old Testament" to the New Testament about Jesus Christ. Muslims accept the value of the Tawrāt and Injīl as revelations from God given to the "People of Scripture," but often do not care to read them because of the widely spread notion that Jews and Christians had corrupted the text or meaning of these Scriptures (*tahrīf*).

I realise this sounds rather abstract, but I want to point out the differences between the default Christian approach and default Islamic approach when talking about Muḥammad and Jesus as prophets. We are not comparing two figures within one tradition, but two traditions in which the two figures have different but comparable functions. The point of comparison is that Muḥammad and Jesus function as models of a life according to God's guidance, and as interpreters of God's revelation. Yet the two traditions approach this function differently: while it is clear Muḥammad functions as a model of a life according to the guidance of the Qur'ān, I aim to elucidate that in Christianity Jesus (as a human being) functions as a model of a life according to the guidance of the Old Testament, not the New Testament. So, where Jesus lives according to the guidance of the Injīl for Muslims, he lives according to the guidance of the Torah for Christians. In fact, the New Testament contains stories about how Jesus lived his life according to the guidance of the Torah, and how he interpreted this Torah in a special way, in a way similar to what is described in the *ḥadīth* literature about Prophet Muḥammad: how he established the *sunna* or customary way to live a life in accordance with the Qur'ān. This implies, if we want to compare Jesus with Muḥammad as models of life and interpreters of Scripture, we need to go back to the Jewish Jesus if we want to do justice to the Christian side of the comparison.

---

<sup>1</sup> See, among others, Leonard Swidler et al., *Bursting the Bonds? A Jewish-Christian Dialogue on Jesus and Paul* (Maryknoll N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990); Tikva Frymer-Kensky et al., *Christianity in Jewish Terms* (Boulder CO: Westview Press, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Qur'ān 3:3-4.

## SAID NURSI ON PROPHET MUHAMMAD AS THE INTERPRETER OF SCRIPTURE

In the context of this chapter, I cannot give an exhaustive analysis of what Said Nursi (1877-1960) has to say about the relation between Prophet Muhammad and the Qur’ān, because Nursi discusses this on practically every page of his *Risale-i Nur*. After all, the entire *Risale* can be understood as a topical commentary on the Qur’ān and the role of prophethood, which is one of its major themes – next to the unity of God, the hereafter and justice.<sup>3</sup> A search on the words “interpreter” or “expounder” – both possible translations of the Arabic and Turkish words *tafsīr* and *tercuman* – gives more than 100 texts for each word, since the religion of Islam with the Qur’ān at its base has a long and multi-layered history of interpretation. Next to the interpretation of the Qur’ān, Islamic tradition has drawn most attention to the interpretation of lawgiving materials, beginning with the Prophet and his most important companions, and continuing with an entire lineage of *mufassirūn*, commentators or interpreters, among whom the *Risale-i Nur* has an important place. In its turn, the *Risale* allows for an entire history of interpretations by students and others, so the history of interpretation of the Qur’ān continues until the present day.

Yet Prophet Muhammad is the very first of these interpreters, since he gave an interpretation of the Qur’ān that he received in his words and deeds, in his entire life. That is why the behaviour of the Prophet, his *sunna*, and the stories about this behaviour of the Prophet, the *hadīth* literature, form the normative interpretation of the Qur’ān; this is similar to the situation in Catholic Christianity where the source of revelation is intimately connected with a normative tradition of explaining this source. I will now discuss some of Said Nursi’s texts in which he speaks about Prophet Muhammad as interpreter of the Qur’ān in order to focus on Nursi’s specific interpretation. After that, I will compare that with some texts from the Christian perspective.

One of the first texts about the prophethood of Muhammad is Said Nursi’s commentary, first published in 1918, in the *Ishārāt al-*Ijāz** in Arabic – or *Signs of Miraculousness* in English, when he discusses the second surah, verse 23: “If you are in doubt as to what We have revealed, step by step, to Our servant, then produce a Sign like thereunto; and call your witnesses besides Allah, if what you say is true.”<sup>4</sup> Said Nursi begins his commentary by remarking that this verse serves to prove the prophethood of Muhammad by pointing to the greatest of the miracles associated with him, viz. the inimitability (*i’jāz*) of the Qur’ān. In the debates between religions about the marks of prophethood, for instance between Judaism and Islam, miracles have always been an important feature. But, as Said Nursi remarks, Prophet Muhammad’s actions did not need to be wondrous in order to point out his truthfulness and justice. So, all of his actions serve to show his justice and fairness; therefore, his entire conduct is proof of the truth of his

<sup>3</sup> Said Nursi explains the four fundamental aims of the Qur’ān at the beginning of his *Signs of Miraculousness*. Even though it is now printed as volume 6 of the *Risale-i Nur* collection, the original work in Arabic (*Ishārāt al-*Ijāz* fi Mazānn al-*Ijāz**) is older than the other parts of the *Risale* and forms to a certain extent its foundation.

<sup>4</sup> English translation as rendered in Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *Signs of Miraculousness* (Istanbul: Sözler, 2004), 181.

prophethood.<sup>5</sup> In that sense, all the stories relating to this conduct of the prophet (the *hadīth*) can be seen as expositions or interpretations of the Qur’ān.<sup>6</sup>

In his Nineteenth Letter, a long treatise dedicated to the miracles of Muḥammad, Said Nursi explains this relation between the Qur’ān and Prophet Muḥammad:

God’s Most Noble Messenger (Upon whom be blessings and peace) was a human being; hence he acted like a human being. He was also a messenger and prophet, and with regard to his messengership, he was an interpreter and an envoy of Almighty God. His messengership was based upon Revelation (*vahy*) which is of two kinds. **The first** is explicit revelation. In this case, the Noble Messenger (Upon whom be blessings and peace) is merely an interpreter and announcer, with no share in the content. The Qur’ān and some sacred Hadith (*Hadīth Qudsi*) are included in this kind of Revelation. **The second** is implicit revelation. The essence and summary of this is also based on Revelation or inspiration, but its explanation and description were left to the Messenger. When he explained and described such Revelation, sometimes he again relied on Revelation, or on inspiration, or sometimes he spoke in terms of his own insight. And, when he resorted to his own interpretation, he either relied on the perceptive power given him on account of his prophetic mission, or he spoke as a human being and conformably to usage, custom and the level of common comprehension.<sup>7</sup>

Nursi here tries to explain the complicated relationship between divine revelation and human interpretation in Prophet Muḥammad. Since God deemed him worthy to be his prophet and messenger, Muḥammad is directly connected to God’s explicit revelation even though the content of this revelation is in no way Muḥammad’s. So, he is the interpreter and the announcer of this explicit revelation, but not its origin. With respect to implicit revelation, Muḥammad can be said to be its origin in his explanations or behaviour, but some of it goes back to divine revelation, while some of it goes back to human customs and usages. Where explicit revelation has come to us in the Qur’ān and some *Hadīth Qudsi* in which God is the author, the implicit revelation has been handed down to us in the many different *hadīth* collections that together form the *sunna* of the Prophet.

This distinction between explicit and implicit revelation enables Said Nursi to address a tension that exists in some Islamic debates about revelation and its relation to Prophet Muḥammad.<sup>8</sup> Some conceptions tend to minimise the role of Prophet Muḥammad by saying he did not contribute anything to explicit revelation since he was an *ummī*, someone who was not among the “People of Scripture” and therefore not knowledgeable about the earlier revelations.<sup>9</sup> Other conceptions tend to maximise the guiding role of Prophet Muḥammad as

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 182.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 189.

<sup>7</sup> Said Nursi, *The Letters* (Istanbul: Sözler, 2001), 123.

<sup>8</sup> I have tried to address this tension in: Pim Valkenberg, *Sharing Lights on the Way to God: Muslim-Christian Dialogue and Theology in the Context of Abrahamic Partnership* (Amsterdam – New York: Editions Rodopi, 2006), 300.

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Midwest Dialogue of Catholics and Muslims, *Revelation: Catholic and Muslim Perspectives* (Washington D.C.: USCCB, 2005). This document was published by the Midwest Catholic-Muslim Dialogue sponsored by the Islamic Society of North America and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. For a critical review, see Pim Valkenberg, “Das Konzept der Offenbarung im Islam aus

the normative foundation of the *sunna*, like the many texts in the *Risale-i Nur* about the excellence and the miracles of the Prophet.

I aim to do justice to Said Nursi by summarising his ideas as follows. When we look at Prophet Muḥammad as the recipient of God's revelation, we see a straight vertical line in which Muḥammad is but the announcer of the explicit revelation he has received from above, without adding any content. Yet, when we look at Prophet Muḥammad as the model of a specific way of living as Muslims, we can say there is a horizontal (inter-human) connection as well, according to which Muḥammad has not only announced explicit revelation, but also transmitted and interpreted implicit revelation. While the source of revelation in both cases is divine and not the personal opinion of Muḥammad, implicit revelation leaves some room for explanation and description in which the personal experience of the Prophet might be relevant as well.

In the Fifth Ray, Said Nursi discusses some allegorical verses of the Qur'ān and some ḥadīths about the events of the end-time. He says that statements such as these cannot be expounded, but have to be interpreted since they contain hidden truths that cannot be understood by everyone. Again, we see how the Prophet functions as the interpreter of what needs to be interpreted in the Qur'ān:

Some of the matters of the Unseen, outside the realm of man's perception, that were made known to the Prophet (PBUH) were made known in detail. These he could in no way alter or interfere with, like the incontestable verses of the Qur'an and Sacred Hadiths. Others, employing his eloquence, he would illustrate and explain in detail or in allegorical form suitably to the wisdom of man's accountability.<sup>10</sup>

Different matters of faith have been revealed differently, some of it in detail, but some of it lacking detail. Since our human faith needs more guidance concerning the afterlife – as this is one of the most important core messages of the Qur'ān – Prophet Muḥammad gave this guidance through interpretation. This is the conclusion Said Nursi draws on this matter:

[S]ince the wisdom in man's accountability necessitates that the questions included among the tenets of belief and communicated explicitly and repeatedly, the Qur'ān of Miraculous Exposition and its Glorious Interpreter (Peace and blessing be upon him) tell of the matters of the hereafter in detail, and of future worldly events only in summary fashion.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, in the Twenty-fifth Word about the miraculousness of the Qur'ān, Nursi strongly connects the Qur'ān with Prophet Muḥammad as its interpreter, and shows how this confirms the truth of God's revelation:

[T]he one who is the source of Islam and interpreter of the Qur'an – his believing in it and holding it in greater respect than everyone else, and being in a sleep-like state when it was revealed, and other words and speeches not resembling or coming near it, and that Interpreter's describing without hesitation and with complete confidence through the Qur'an

---

der Perspektive Komparativer Theologie," in *Komparative Theologie. Interreligiöse Vergleiche als Weg der Religionstheologie*, ed. Reinhold Bernhardt and Klaus von Stosch (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 2009), 140.

<sup>10</sup> Said Nursi, *The Rays* (Istanbul: Sözler, 1998), 98.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 100.

true cosmic events of generally the past and the future from behind the veil of the Unseen, and no trickery or fault being observed in him while being under the gazes of the sharpest eyes, and his believing and affirming every pronouncement of the Qur'an with all his strength and nothing shaking him, is a stamp confirming that the Qur'an is revealed and true and the blessed Word of his own Compassionate Creator.<sup>12</sup>

Again, we see that two things are affirmed at the same time: on the one hand, the Prophet is passive, in a sleep-like condition, so as to add nothing to what was revealed to him. On the other, he is totally convinced of the truth of the revelation, and he is its most reliable interpreter, both in his words and in his deeds. He has special knowledge – “from behind the veil of the Unseen” – but at the same time as a human being his words are totally different from the words of revelation. In this manner, Said Nursi describes in an admirable fashion the greatness of the Prophet and his fundamental submissiveness to God's revelation. Human words can function as interpretation and explanation of revelation, but never replace the words of revelation. Yet, since the Prophet is closest of all human beings to this special knowledge that is conveyed in the Qur'an, his interpretation – handed down as *hadīth* and *sunna* of the Prophet – serves as a model for all Muslims. That is why Said Nursi calls Prophet Muḥammad very often “the supreme guide and the most perfect teacher.”<sup>13</sup> We will now look at how Jesus functions as a prophet for Christians. This will enable us to identify the similarities as well as differences in the manner in which the notion of prophet is employed in Christianity and Islam.

## JESUS CHRIST AS THE INTERPRETER OF SCRIPTURE

As I mentioned at the beginning of this article, it is possible to compare prophets Muḥammad and Jesus as interpreters of the Scriptures, but if we want to do justice to the Christian interpretation of Jesus – in other words, if we really want to do interreligious or comparative theology and not just compare two prophets within the religion of Islam – we will need to include the Hebrew Bible, because Jesus is not the interpreter of the Gospel, which was written after his death and resurrection, but the interpreter of the Jewish scriptures. This is what the New Testament tells us: Jesus does not interpret the Gospel, but the Scriptures of his own Jewish faith. Incidentally, the Qur'an seems to recognise this as well, since Jesus says in Al 'Imrān: “I have come to confirm the truth of the Torah which preceded me, and to make some things lawful to you which used to be forbidden.”<sup>14</sup> So, Jesus is a prophet and lawgiver in the Qur'an, but for Christians He is more than a prophet since he is the fulfilment of the law and prophets, as he says in one of the Gospels: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.”<sup>15</sup> Law and prophets together form the core of the Jewish Scriptures, and therefore Jesus is sketched in the New Testament as the fulfilment of the (Jewish) Scriptures.

<sup>12</sup> Said Nursi, *The Words* (Istanbul: Sözler, 2002), 462.

<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, Said Nursi, *The Letters*, 119; Nursi, *The Rays*, 240; Nursi, *The Flashes*, 410, 412.

<sup>14</sup> Qur'an 3:50, M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an. English translation and Parallel Arabic text* (Oxford – New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 57.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew 5:17.

This function of Jesus becomes most explicitly clear in one of the resurrection stories in the Gospel according to Luke, where Jesus appears to two of his disciples who had hoped that he would be the Saviour of Israel, but whose hopes had seemingly been dashed by Jesus' execution. When Jesus asks them what has happened, they give the following summary of their expectations of Jesus as a prophet:

The things that happened to Jesus the Nazarene, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, how our chief priests and rulers both handed him over to a sentence of death and crucified him. But we were hoping that he would be the one to redeem Israel; and besides all this, it is now the third day since this took place. Some women from our group, however, have astounded us: they were at the tomb early in the morning and did not find his body; they came back and reported that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who announced that he was alive. Then some of those with us went to the tomb and found things just as the women had described, but him they did not see.<sup>16</sup>

This is the summary that these two disciples give according to Luke, showing their Jewish faith: Jesus was hoped for as the future Messiah, a prophet mighty in word and deed, the one who would save Israel, probably by a political revolution against the Romans. But instead, his revolution failed and the religious and political leaders killed him. The third day, the decisive day of possible resurrection has now passed and even though some women reported an encounter with angels who announced he was alive, the male disciples could not endorse their testimony; therefore, it was, according to Jewish law, worthless. The disciples do not believe the women, but Jesus sharply rebukes them because of their unbelief: "Oh, how foolish you are! How slow of heart to believe all that the prophets spoke! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and enter into his glory?"<sup>17</sup> Jesus tells them they have failed to understand the Jewish prophets and their words about the coming Messiah: it was necessary – *dei* in Greek, a word that in the Gospel according to Luke refers to God's plan for human salvation – that the Messiah suffer and rise again. Luke adds: "Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them what referred to him in all the scriptures." Later, the disciples will reflect: "Were not our hearts burning within us while he spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us?"<sup>18</sup>

This scene from the Gospel clearly depicts Jesus as a prophet who interprets the earlier prophets as referring to Himself, again showing an intriguing parallel between Jesus and the Qur'ān as a scripture that explains and confirms earlier scriptures while addressing Muḥammad as a later prophet. We could say that Jesus begins with the Jewish faith of the disciples ("beginning with Moses and all the prophets") and shows them a hitherto unexplored new direction of this faith. For Christians, this also forms the point of departure for a Christ-centred interpretation of the Old Testament that gave rise to so many problems between Christians and Jews in later history: two rival interpretations of the same Scripture, one of them insisting the other does not read well enough what God meant to indicate about God's saving plan in these

<sup>16</sup> Luke 24:19-24. Translation New American Bible.

<sup>17</sup> Luke 24:25-26.

<sup>18</sup> Luke 24:27 and 32.

Scriptures. Yet the important point here is that it is the Jewish scriptures that receive this new interpretation. Jesus famously explains the hermeneutical principle of this new interpretation in his Sermon on the Mount according to Matthew's Gospel. Here the new interpretation refers not so much to the Prophets, the second part of the Hebrew Bible, but to the Torah or Law, its first part. The refrain is well-known: "You have heard that it was said ... (do not commit adultery) ... but I say to you ... (do not even look at a woman with lust in your eye)". Jesus' solution is much more radical than the *hijab*: "If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away."<sup>19</sup> Christians have often interpreted this in a supersessionist way, as if the old interpretation is no longer valid now that Jesus has given his new interpretation. Thanks to the improvement in Christian–Jewish relations, we now would rather say that he radicalises the Law. Nevertheless, he does so with an authority ("but *I say to you...*") that is unusual.<sup>20</sup> This apparently did not escape his listeners, and so Matthew concludes his description of the Sermon on the Mount saying: "When Jesus finished these words, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes."<sup>21</sup> The other three authors of the four gospels give similar descriptions, and so we read in Mark that the crowds say, after Jesus has driven out an unclean spirit: "What is this? A new teaching with authority. He commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him."<sup>22</sup> In Luke we read "They were astonished at his teaching because he spoke with authority."<sup>23</sup> And finally in John, the guards sent by the Pharisees to arrest Jesus, come back and in reply to the question why they did not arrest him, they say: "Never before has anyone spoken like this one."<sup>24</sup> In a number of stories, Jesus says he is greater than one of the prophets, Jonah, or Abraham.<sup>25</sup>

It is significant to note these texts all allude to a combination of continuity and discontinuity: there is continuity since Jesus is one of the prophets, and he teaches according to the Jewish scriptures. But at the same time, there is something new that is more than just continuity; here is a new authority, a new way of speaking, and certainly a new way of acting. This new way was in fact the first indication of what was to become Christianity. Before they were called "Christians," the first followers of Jesus were called "people of the way," and they called themselves by this name as well; for instance, Paul, pleading his case before Felix, the Roman governor of Judea, says: "this I do admit to you, that according to the Way, which they" – his accusers – "call a sect, I worship the God of our ancestors and I believe everything that is in accordance with the law and written in the prophets."<sup>26</sup> This manner of speaking about the Way must sound familiar to Jews and Muslims, because it indicates the way of fulfilling the Law – Torah for Jews, Sharia for Muslims – which is called *halakhah* or "a way to go." As Paul makes

<sup>19</sup> Matthew 5:27-29.

<sup>20</sup> At least, according to the New Testament it is unusual. In contemporary dialogue between Christians and Jews the point has been made that the Pharisees used the same kind of personal authority.

<sup>21</sup> Matthew 7:28-29.

<sup>22</sup> Mark 1:27.

<sup>23</sup> Luke 4:32.

<sup>24</sup> John 7:46.

<sup>25</sup> See Matthew 12:41; John 8:58.

<sup>26</sup> Acts of the Apostles 24:14.

clear in this quotation, the first Christians saw themselves as Jews who followed a specific interpretation of the Law, Way or *halakhah* of Jesus. But Jews saw this way as a break with tradition, as a sect, and therefore they persecuted the Christians. In their turn, the Christians began to speak about their way as something new, with greater authority than just that of another prophet, and this prompted them to go beyond the notion of prophethood in their conception of Jesus. Most dramatically, this happens in the eighth chapter of the Gospel according to John, one of the most sharply anti-Judaic passages in the New Testament, where Jesus says to the Jews – reflecting the later situation of the community to which John belonged – that they will become free only when they follow his word. The Jews respond that they do not need to be set free since they are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves.<sup>27</sup> Jesus begins to tell them they will not see death if they accept his word, and again the Jews answer: “Are you greater than our father Abraham who died? Or the prophets who died? Who do you make yourself out to be?”<sup>28</sup> Jesus then answers that his glory comes from God, and he knows God while the Jews do not know God. He even goes further and identifies himself with God by saying: “Amen, amen, I say to you, before Abraham came to be, I AM.”<sup>29</sup> These last words, I AM, are capitalised in some Christian Bibles, because they are seen as a clear allusion to the holy name of God in the Hebrew Bible, YHWH, which means “I AM WHO AM.”<sup>30</sup> In reaction to this, the Jews try to throw stones at him because of this blatant blasphemy, but Jesus escapes.

This text in the Gospel according to John is probably the text that most clearly shows the discontinuity between Judaism and Christianity, while displaying at the same time the difference between Jesus Christ and his being just a prophet. Jesus is much more than merely a prophet, he even identifies himself with God. I have often noticed that Christians in their efforts not to break off communication with Jews or Muslims will shy away from such a direct identification between Christ and God, even though the confession of Jesus Christ as God incarnate is constitutive of the Christian faith. Following the lead of exegetes and historical theologians, they will argue that it took the Christian community a few centuries to find the proper language to express their faith, as they finally did in the ecumenical councils at Nicea, Constantinople and Chalcedon (4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> centuries). Therefore, the questions about the role of Jesus Christ in their monotheistic faith were different for the first generation of Christians in a Jewish context and for later generations of Christians in the context of the Roman Empire and Hellenistic culture.<sup>31</sup> In between, the Gospel according to John reflects a situation in which Christians still lived in a majority Jewish context, in which however Jewish opposition necessitated Christians to highlight the discontinuity with Judaism. The Acts of the Apostles reflects a much earlier situation in which the term “People of the Way” shows the first Christians likely underscored the continuity with Judaism because they saw themselves as Jews

<sup>27</sup> See John 8:31-33.

<sup>28</sup> John 8:53.

<sup>29</sup> John 8:58.

<sup>30</sup> See Exodus 3:14.

<sup>31</sup> See David Burrell, *Towards a Jewish-Christian-Muslim Theology* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 170, with reference to Bernard Lonergan.

and worshipped in the temple together with Jews.<sup>32</sup> Yet, at the same time, they had their own rituals, described at the same time, such as the breaking of bread and eating together. This refers to the special way of doing the Law in following Jesus. It also shows, at this time, the Christians distinguished themselves from others by certain practices, a specific way of interpreting the Jewish law following Jesus.

The New Testament offers Christians distinctly different models to think about the role of Jesus Christ in his relation to the Jewish Scriptures. On the one hand, it is possible to see Jesus as interpreting and fulfilling the Law and thus acting in the way of the prophets; on the other hand, it is also possible to see him as radically diverging from the Jewish interpretation of the Scriptures because of his identification with God. While Christianity has largely explored the avenues of the latter possibility by placing the uniqueness of Jesus Christ central in its identity, the new situation of interreligious encounters with Jews and Muslims makes it possible to explore the other possibilities as well.

I would like to suggest, in this respect, Jesus may function as a sign of continuity with Judaism, as a prophet who explains the Jewish scriptures in a way that functions as a model for the first Christians, in much the same way as the *sunna* of Prophet Muḥammad functions as a model for the first Muslims. In that sense, we can say that both prophets function similarly for their followers. Yet at the same time, the texts that indicate the special authority of Jesus in interpreting the Scriptures seem to indicate a discontinuity with Judaism – and with Islam – insofar as Jesus is seen as more than a prophet. This tendency to underline the discontinuity comes to a climax in the text where Jesus says, “before Abraham was, I AM.” Such a text – even though written decades after the life of Jesus – clearly indicates a tendency in Christianity to accept Jesus as not just a prophet or interpreter, but as someone who brings a new relationship with God since He already IS in the relationship with the one whom He calls Father. In texts such as these, from John 8, we can see how the Christian confession of the Trinity – God as Father, Son and Spirit – begins to take shape. At the same time, the discontinuity with Judaism becomes antagonistic to such an extent there is a demonising of Judaism.<sup>33</sup>

This is not the place to engage in a deep discussion about possible parallels in the development of the relations with Jews and Christians in early Islam; suffice it to say, many scholars see a similar development from an acceptance of continuity between the three Abrahamic or monotheistic religions in the Meccan period to a more critical attitude towards Jews and Christians as “People of Scripture” in the Medinan period or even later.<sup>34</sup> The notion of a growing development of discontinuity paired to a remaining significance of continuity,

<sup>32</sup> See, for instance, Acts 2:46.

<sup>33</sup> I was made aware of the anti-Judaism in John 8 by my former colleague and New Testament scholar at Radboud University Nijmegen, Prof. Sjef van Tilborg. We have published about this in volume 21 (“Theologie en Exegese”) of the *Jaarboek van het Thomas Instituut te Utrecht*, published in 2001 (in Dutch).

<sup>34</sup> In his book *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), Fred Donner suggests until the early Umayyad period there was no clear distinction between adherents of the three religions.

however, seems to point to the historical relationship between the three Abrahamic religions. At the same time, it is precisely the coexistence of continuities or similarities and discontinuities or differences that makes comparative theology possible. A comparison is only possible on the basis of a relation or a similarity (for instance, Islam and Christianity are both monotheistic religions). On closer inspection, however, the common characteristic reveals a deeper difference (*tawhid* monotheism in Islam is different from Trinitarian monotheism in Christianity). Yet, finally, investigating this difference often yields a horizon of convergence (Muslims and Christians worship the same God in different ways, and live their lives in hopes of finally meeting God after this life).<sup>35</sup> The same is true for a comparison between Jesus and Muhammad as prophets for Muslims and Christians. It starts out with a superficial similarity (both can be characterised as “prophets”), develops a deeper dissimilarity (Jesus is essentially not a prophet in the way in which Muhammad is a prophet) and sets out to discover a horizon of as yet undiscovered convergence: Jesus and Muhammad function as models of behaviour for those who want to follow them in their customary way of practicing the divine Law. And yet, another difference opens up in the Christian ambiguity towards the Jewish law that is expressed by Paul in the New Testament and recognised by the Qur’ān when it quotes Jesus: “I have come to confirm the truth of the Torah which preceded me, and to make some things lawful to you which used to be forbidden”.<sup>36</sup> Christians seem to be less serious about the importance of the divine Law than Muslims and Jews, because Jesus has a higher authority for them than the Law.

Despite these differences, at the practical level it is possible for Christians and Muslims to work together, and even to do so following in the footsteps of their prophets. It is Said Nursi’s great merit that he has indicated the way towards this working together of Muslims and Christians before anyone else in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>37</sup> While it would be misleading to describe him as a prophet, he certainly was an eminent interpreter of the Qur’ān and in that sense he is certainly a guide and teacher for many Muslims who want to engage in meaningful dialogue with Christians. He can also be seen as a guiding light for those outside Islam who are sincere in their search for God.<sup>38</sup>

Said Nursi’s distinction between explicit and implicit revelation in his Nineteenth Letter may help Christians and Muslims to further explore the two exemplary characteristics of Jesus Christ and Muhammad as prophets. On the one hand, as receivers of explicit revelation they were in their human lives extremely receptive to God’s revelation and they transformed their humanity to become translucent: “light upon light,” as the Qur’ān says in its famous “light verse,” almost echoing the Christian liturgical praise in the Psalm: “In your light we see

<sup>35</sup> Thomas Aquinas’ famous teaching about analogy in our human language of God develops in a similar way: the *triplex via* of causality, negation, and eminence. For the theological questions involved, see Miroslav Volf, *Allah: A Christian Response* (New York: HarperOne, 2011) and Mona Siddiqui, *Christians, Muslims, and Jesus* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

<sup>36</sup> Qur’ān 3:50.

<sup>37</sup> See Thomas Michel, *Reflections on Said Nursi’s Views on Muslim-Christian Understanding* (Istanbul: Söz Basım Yayın, 2003).

<sup>38</sup> Valkenberg, *Sharing Lights on the Way to God*, 271.

light.”<sup>39</sup> In this manner, Jesus and Muḥammad were prophets because they pointed to God as the source of their lives. The Christian will add this is true for Jesus in his humanity, but at the same time, Christ is also confessed as “God of God, Light of Light” as the Nicene Creed has it. In other words, the receiver of the source is consubstantial with the source.

On the other hand, as transmitters and interpreters of implicit revelation, Jesus and Muḥammad are models of its interpretation in their own lives. The *sunna* of Muḥammad and the *halakhah* of Jesus are normative for those who follow them. Again, there is a similarity and deeper difference here: the *sunna* of Muḥammad is nothing more than an interpretation of the revelation he received from God; the *halakhah* of Jesus is a specific interpretation of the revelation that Moses received from God, but it is more than that: it is rooted in his own personal relation to the One he called his Father, and ultimately Christians believe he is as Son constituted by this relation.

When Said Nursi explains how Prophet Muḥammad is fundamentally submissive to God’s revelation and at the same time the best possible interpreter of this revelation, Christians can learn a lot from him – not only about Prophet Muḥammad, but also about Jesus as a prophet. They can not only learn to appreciate better the two sides of Prophet Muḥammad for Muslims: fundamentally submissive and a human model at the same time; they can also learn to appreciate better how these two sides are true in a different fashion for Jesus Christ in their own faith: as a human being he is totally submissive to God’s will, but in his human model Christians believe that no other than God is revealed.

---

<sup>39</sup> Qur’ān 24:35; Psalm 36:9. For a further reflection, see Valkenberg, *Sharing Lights on the Way to God*, 211-13.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abdel Haleem, M.A.S. *The Qur'an. English Translation and Parallel Arabic text.* Oxford – New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Burrell, David. *Towards a Jewish-Christian-Muslim Theology.* Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.

Donner, Fred. *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam.* Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010.

Frymer-Kensky, Tikva, David Novak, Peter Ochs, David Fox Sandmel and Michael A. Signer. *Christianity in Jewish Terms.* Boulder CO: Westview Press, 2000.

Michel, Thomas. *Reflections on Said Nursi's Views on Muslim-Christian Understanding.* Istanbul: Söz Basım Yayın, 2003.

Midwest Dialogue of Catholics and Muslims. *Revelation: Catholic and Muslim Perspectives.* Washington D.C.: USCCB, 2005.

Nursi, Said. *Signs of Miraculousness.* Istanbul: Sözler, 2004.

Nursi, Said. *The Letters.* Istanbul: Sözler, 2001.

Nursi, Said. *The Rays.* Istanbul: Sözler, 1998.

Nursi, Said. *The Words.* Istanbul: Sözler, 2002.

Senior, Donald, and John J. Collins, eds. *The Catholic Study Bible. New American Bible.* Oxford – New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Siddiqui, Mona. *Christians, Muslims, and Jesus.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013.

Swidler, Leonard, Lewis John Eron, Gerard S. Sloyan and Lester Dean. *Bursting the Bonds? A Jewish-Christian Dialogue on Jesus and Paul.* Maryknoll N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990.

Valkenberg, Pim. "Das Konzept der Offenbarung im Islam aus der Perspektive Komparativer Theologie." In *Komparative Theologie. Interreligiöse Vergleiche als Weg der Religionstheologie*, edited by Reinhold Bernhardt and Klaus von Stosch, 123-145. Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 2009.

Valkenberg, Pim. *Sharing Lights on the Way to God: Muslim-Christian Dialogue and Theology in the Context of Abrahamic Partnership.* Amsterdam – New York: Editions Rodopi, 2006.

Volf, Miroslav. *Allah: A Christian Response.* New York: HarperOne, 2011.