



## The Other Prophet: Jesus in the Qur'an

by Mouhanad Khorchide and Klaus von Stosch, translated by Simon Pare  
from the German, London, Ginkgo Library, 2019, 225 pp., \$39.95 (hardback),  
ISBN 9781909942363

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To cite this article: Axel Marc Oaks Takacs (2021): The Other Prophet: Jesus in the Qur'an, Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2020.1863636>



Published online: 06 Jan 2021.



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## BOOK REVIEW

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*The Other Prophet: Jesus in the Qur'an* is a unique contribution to the field of Islamic–Christian studies. Co-authored by a Muslim (Mouhanad Khordiche) and a Christian (Klaus von Stosch), both scholars academically trained in their respective religious traditions' theologies and histories as well as comparative theology, the book's subject matter is Christology, that is, the nature and function of Jesus Christ in both the Christian and Islamic traditions. Even though this is a topic on which much ink has been spilled since the seventh century, from pre-modern Muslim and Christian polemics and apologetics to modern writings that range from the inclusivist and pluralist to the exclusivist and Islamophobic, this particular book represents a fundamentally singular approach to Jesus in the Qur'an that thus offers novel insights into Christological debates and prophetology – for both Muslims and Christians. These insights pertain not only to the status of Christological debates in the historical and geographical context in which the Qur'an was proclaimed, not only to qur'anic prophetology, but also to present-day Christology, the philosophy of freedom, theodicy, soteriology, and more – once again, for both Muslims and Christians. In fact, this is the beauty of the book: written by both a Muslim and a Christian, it is attuned to contemporary theological questions facing communities of Muslims and Christians today, and responds to them in a way sensitive to each of the respective communities' vocabulary and grammar, and the logic of their tradition. The book rarely gives a sense that one tradition is subsuming the other in a hegemonic fashion.

Chapter 1 ('Introduction') lays out the purpose and methodological uniqueness of this particular project. The authors' three goals are retracing 'the history of the dispute over Jesus in the Qur'an', demonstrating the 'hermeneutic significance of [the] Christological debate' for understanding the Qur'an and suggesting how 'studying the Qur'an can help Christians to intensify and purify their belief in Jesus Christ' (3). The four methodological approaches are: the book's co-authorship by a Christian and a Muslim (a first, at least to the best of their and this reviewer's knowledge); a diachronic exegesis and exploration of the Qur'an's proclamations about Jesus (drawing from Angelika Neuwirth's *Corpus Coranicum* project); interpreting the most important suras about Jesus (i.e. 3, 5, and 19) in a holistic fashion and treating each of them as literary entities; and comparative theology, which entails learning from a religious tradition other than one's own and in this case aims 'not to compete to determine who has the better perspective on Jesus of Nazareth, but rather to advance our perspectives by remaining faithful to the truths to which we are both committed' (5). The complexity of the exploration and arguments that follow in the remaining six chapters belie these apparently straightforward goals and methods. This is particularly the case for Chapters 2 and 3, which offer nuanced explications of seventh-century Christological debates and modern Christology through historical and systematic reflections filled with technical terms and concepts.

Chapter 2 ('On the State of Christology in the Seventh Century') is an historical review of the developments, controversies and debates concerning Christology after the Council of Chalcedon in 451. The assumption, one with which the most recent scholarship now

agrees, is that these Christological discussions informed the Christianities present in the seventh-century Arabian Peninsula and thus are hermeneutically critical in interpreting the Qur'an's proclamations concerning Jesus. This chapter is a veritable tour-de-force that packs the details of the School of Alexandria, the School of Antioch, the Chalcedonian controversy, the monophysitism of Eutychianism and Apollinarianism, the miaphysitism of non-Chalcedonian Christologies, the apthartodocetism of Julian of Halicarnassus, the enhypostasis theory of neo-Chalcedonianism, the conciliar rejection of monotheletism, and much more. It is thus evident that this chapter is not for the neophyte Christologist. Nonetheless, the purpose of these technical explications is to situate the Christological statements in the Qur'an within 'the main currents of Christianity that existed at the time' (33) of its proclamations, and this it masterfully does. When the proclaimer of the Qur'an challenges Christians or Christianity vis-à-vis the nature of Jesus, the authors contend that we must understand those declarations as applying to specific Christians, Christianities, and thus Christologies and not to Christianity *tout court*. Nonetheless, the criticisms the proclaimer of the Qur'an makes of a certain Christology may very well apply to Christologies that remain popular even to this day; because of this, Christians may learn from the qur'anic proclamations against a certain problematic conception of Jesus's role in revelation and soteriology. So if Christians *today* are to learn from the Qur'an vis-à-vis Christology, then a grasp of Christology *today* is necessary. To that end, Chapter 3 turns.

'New Developments in Modern Christology' is the only chapter written by a single author (von Stosch). Its purpose is to review modern Christologies and then propose therefrom a particular Christology that will be used in the remainder of the book as the basis for a dialogue with the qur'anic view of Jesus. The goal here is decisively *not* to water down Christology in search of irenic or lowest-common-denominator agreements with qur'anic Christology. Once again, this chapter is not for the novice systematic theologian. Here the reader will encounter the confluence of modern theology with modern philosophy (including transcendental philosophy and the philosophy of freedom and the subject) through such theologians as Friedrich Schleiermacher, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Thomas Pröpper, Karl-Heinz Menke, Georg Essen, Jürgen Werbick, Walter Kasper, Hans Urs von Balthasar and Karl Rahner, and such philosophers as Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Dieter Henrich, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and more. The aim is to offer the reader the background for the modern shift in Christology *from* 'ontological, substance-theoretical statements' *to* 'anthropological perspective[s]' (49), that is, to the paradigm shift in relational ontology. The experience of love in the divine self-revelation of the Incarnate Word Jesus Christ becomes the basis for comparison with the divine self-revelation of the Word of God the Qur'an, 'which makes the beauty of God aesthetically tangible and intends to spark us into love' (61). The remainder of the book is dedicated to the task of this exercise in comparative theology, viz., 'whether the content of the Qur'an is compatible with the attested Christian concept of God's pledging of Himself in the man Jesus of Nazareth' (61).

Chapter 4 ('A Holistic Reading of Surahs 19, 3 and 5 in the Context of a Diachronic Reading of the Qur'an's Verses about Jesus') is an exceptional combination of the most cutting-edge, literary-critical analysis of the Qur'an both with classical Islamic commentaries (*tafsirs*) and with the authors' own novel insights regarding the Qur'an's proclamations about Jesus, Christians, and Christianity. The longest chapter in the book (56 pages), it could very well be assigned by itself as a way to understand the subtle theological and political transitions from the Meccan to the late Medinan periods during which the Prophet Muhammad moves from seeking reconciliation and a sort of unity-in-plurality among the various Christian groups and the early community of Muslims to intervening 'in Christians' Christological debates to correct errant views and [propose] a new and original codification of their basic

ideas' (64). The general argument of the chapter, in which specific examples from these three suras are given, is that qur'anic criticisms of certain Christological views should be interpreted as denunciations of specific Christological exaggerations and not of all Christian Christologies *tout court*. In fact, the authors' constructive arguments begin increasingly to emerge in this chapter: the criticisms of certain Christologies in the Qur'an apply equally to Christologies today. That may be, *inter alia*, 'reducing God to an idol', which is an 'inherent risk of any Christology' (112), or deifying clerics and monks in a way that places humans above God. This latter threat remains to this day when Christians 'consider God's being made man to mean that individual humans are dispensed from all criticism, blurring the boundary between God and humans' (115).

Chapter 5 ('Jesus's Position in Qur'anic Prophetology') is an exceptionally constructive contribution to the field of Islamic–Christian comparative theology. Indeed, the unstated assumption itself is arguably a theologically critical contribution: if Christology is the central theological anthropological topic of Christianity, a topic around which all other theological questions are oriented and in which they perhaps find their answers, then prophetology functions *mutatis mutandis* for the Islamic traditions. In this way, rather than aiming to understand Jesus on Christian terms (as *Son of God* or as *God made man*), a more fruitful comparative exercise is situating Jesus within the Islamic concepts of prophethood and messengership (*nubuwwa* and *risāla*), which is precisely how this chapter proceeds, and with novel insights to boot. The chapter unfolds the qur'anic declarations regarding eschatology, mercy, soteriological election, prophethood and messengership or apostleship from the early to middle and late Meccan periods. The tentative conclusion is truly thought-provoking: in the Qur'an, prophetology is a counter-discourse to Christology, and it serves both to honour certain biblical figures, including Jesus, and to relativize Christology. The dialogue between prophetology and Christology is additionally meritorious because in the Qur'an prophets are mocked, persecuted, rejected and even killed, and of course the soteriological and redemptive meaning of the passion of Jesus Christ (for Christians) is fruitfully interpreted through this qur'anic prophetology.

In Chapter 6 ('The Work of Jesus Christ and the Qur'an: A Forensic Search for Functional Equivalents'), the careful symmetrical and mutual dialogue occurring between the Islamic and Christian traditions is somewhat lost. The chapter opens with a series of five queries seemingly framed from the Christian perspective; the authors themselves suggest that 'the Qur'an offers possibilities ... to be understood in terms of Jesus Christ's interpretive system and to enter into a fruitful dialogue with it' (158). Given this viewpoint, the authors argue that the Qur'an is 'an event of God's presence' and they present 'a Qur'anic concept in which God imparts His own being or allows His own being to become an event' (158–159). This is the danger of any comparative exercise between Christian and Islamic traditions. The legacy of Christian hegemony and Orientalism colours any interpretation of the Qur'an and Islam *in terms of* Jesus Christ and Christianity as nothing but a reproduction and perpetuation of this asymmetrical history and discourse. However, that a Muslim author is involved in the dialogue and authorship of this chapter mitigates these concerns. Perhaps this is a lesson for all scholars of constructive, interreligious theology between Christianity and other religious traditions: while the history of Christian supersessionism should always be taken into account, when the non-Christian tradition is engaged through the lens of Christianity, or when the non-Christian learns from the Christian, the conclusions reached should not automatically be devalued, nor should those conclusions inevitably be labelled Orientalist or hegemonic, at least when the approach is as careful and critical as Khorchide's and von Stosch's.

Nonetheless, some surprising choices are made in this chapter. It is unclear why the authors turned to Ibn Sina and Mulla Şadra for an Islamic conception of divine love and the God-world relationship. There are many other classical and post-classical Muslim authors who offer an even more *qur'anic* conception of divine love, mercy, suffering, grief and freedom, and the God-word relationship, along with their theological anthropological corollaries, and who are less beholden to Greek philosophy than Ibn Sina and Mulla Şadra, and more explicitly shaped by the qur'anic discourse, such as 'Abdallāh Anşārī (d. 1089), Aḥmad Ghazālī (d. 1123 or 1126), Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī (fl. twelfth century), or Aḥmad ibn Maṣnūr Sam'ānī (d. 1140). This is not to suggest that this exposition is lacking; rather, some sort of justification for turning to *these* Muslim thinkers over others would have been welcomed. Nonetheless, the authors' conclusions are that the 'Qur'an constitutes a functional equivalent to Jesus Christ, insofar as the Qur'an also makes it tangible that God desires to be there for us and to enter into a relationship with us' (176). Their presentation of the soteriological relevance of the Qur'an expounds on an Islamic theology of mercy, relation, freedom, suffering, *fiṭra* anthropology, forgiveness and redemption, all with the intellectual acumen of the *madhhab-i 'ishq* (School of [Passionate] Love) but surprisingly with *none* of the members thereof present in the exposition. Toward the conclusion of this chapter, the authors ask:

For Christians, the crucial question would then be whether one can make out in the Qur'an that God is moved, affected and changed by human suffering, and whether He is capable of transforming it from within, unleashing creative processes of forgiveness. (192)

Indeed, the question could be rewritten with 'For members of the *madhhab-i 'ishq* ...', and the answer would have been, 'Absolutely!'. We know that the School of Love treated these topics directly and ingeniously; their absence is one gentle critique of the chapter. Whilst recognizing that attending to the School of Love may have been outside of the authors' purview, its absence has the unfortunate effect of suggesting that these matters and questions are entirely novel to the interpretation of the Qur'an, matters and questions that have arisen through this comparative theological exercise with the Christian tradition; but this is certainly not the case given what we know about the *madhhab-i 'ishq*, whose central teaching is that concomitant with love is suffering.

The final chapter ('New Perspectives on the Qur'an') proposes systematic conclusions from a Christian perspective and then from a Muslim perspective; two sections each written by one of the co-authors. Here we see the major fruits of this exercise in comparative theology summarized in succinct fashion. The Christian insights revolve mainly around the dangers of deifying Jesus in a way that separates him from the human experience of suffering and freedom; that is, making Jesus into an idol rather than into the presence of a compassionate God on earth and in the flesh. The Muslim insights revolve mainly around the dangers of dwelling too much on the historical legacy of polemical and apologetic discourses that have restricted Muslim-Christian dialogue; that is, there is far less anti-Christian rhetoric in the Qur'an than traditionally assumed, and far more rebuke against any false belief and practice that deifies humans or teachings in a way that privileges one religion over other, thus placing a certain constructed doctrine in the place of God's omnipotence.

Von Stosch and Khorchide offer a thoroughly extraordinary example of Muslim-Christian comparative theology. While the chosen subject continues to centre the topic that has gripped Muslims and Christians historically, they approach it in a way that offers novel insights into the question of Jesus *and/in* the Qur'an (perhaps a more appropriate title, given how they attend not only to Jesus *in* the Qur'an but also to how the soteriological function of Jesus may be found in the qur'anic self-revelation of the divine presence through the Prophet

Muhammad). This text should be used in any advanced undergraduate- or graduate-level course, with the caveat that the Christological chapters are not for the faint-hearted. A major bonus is that each chapter could be read as an independent investigation on the topic. Aside from the gentle criticisms detailed above, the only major concern is that the book lacks an index, which would have been *tremendously* useful given the rich and complex topics discussed. The ability to cross-reference technical terms and subjects would make the book far more beneficial than it already is.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2020.1863636>

