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## **“Mohammed – Prophet for Christians also?”**

“We Muslims recognize Jesus as a prophet and revere him. Why do you Christians not accept Mohammed as a prophet in the same way?” Among Christians with Muslim friends and acquaintances who talk about religious issues, there are unlikely to be many who have not encountered this question before. Often it will have been pointed out that the West even to this day insolently and hurtfully denigrates Mohammed in images and words, libeling his character and his name in an unspeakable manner.

In reply to these accusations of injury and libel Christians will express with deep regret the enormous extent of ignorance of past generations in terms of other cultures and religions. This ignorance was often linked with fear and deep discontent about “the Muslims”, i.e. the Saracens, the Turks, etc. The renewed flaring up of such vilification is, at least in parts, connected to the subliminal fears of large groups of society in Europe of Islamist terrorist attacks. It is also connected with the rapidly increasing visibility of Muslim groups and movements as a consequence of specifically Islamic dress and the construction of widely visible mosques in the centers of Western European cities.

However, this first question of Muslims with its implied request for the mutual recognition of Jesus and Mohammed as prophets goes even deeper. At first it ostensibly appears to have some degree of plausibility. After careful analysis, however, it becomes apparent that the stated parallel between the Muslim’s reverence of Jesus and the Christian rejection of Mohammad is deceptive. Because where Muslims revere Jesus as a prophet in the sense of their Qur’an based faith, they simply follow

their creed. The Jesus depicted in Islam identifies with the Qur'an's message and lives in accordance with the rules laid down in the Qur'an. To recognize this Jesus does not cost Muslims anything, because the role of the Jesus of the Qur'an is precisely that: to support the belief in Mohammed as the final true prophet, and therefore the veracity of the Qur'an. If, on the other hand, a Christian seriously accepts Mohammed's claim he turns away from everything laid down in Christianity's most important creedal documents.

What is it, therefore, that Muslim partners are asking of Christians? The faithful Muslim is convinced that Islam is the true religion, "the religion of the truth" (*dīn al-haqq*, sura 9, 33). On the basis of this conviction Muslims know themselves to be instructed to invite Christians to recognize the truth of Islam, and to conversion into the community of Muslims.

### **The term prophet in Islam**

For believing Muslims a true prophet is someone who brings a message from God and who works with absolute determination towards the effective implementation of this message. The Islamic belief of the unchanging message of true prophets has at its core the doctrine of God's uniqueness and unity, and of the responsibility each individual has before God, the creator and judge. It is the message that has been proclaimed by all true prophets since Adam. It is written into the nature of each human being (see also sura 30, 30), and each person is now obliged to recognize and accept this message. It is contained in its final, complete and utterly clear form in the text of the Qur'an as it was faithfully delivered by Mohammad. Today this message reaches everyone through the faithful witness of the umma as a whole as well as its single members. Each person is asked to become a Muslim, to publicly become a member of the Islamic community, and therefore to walk the "straight path" of the revealed law. That path is laid down in great detail in the text of the Qur'an, the reliable statements of Mohammed ("sound" Hadiths), and in the sharia, derived from these two sources. In following this path the Muslim witnesses to the truth and struggles for the "clear victory" (*al-fath al-mubīn*, e.g. 48, 1) of Islam in this world.

Christians find the request to recognize Mohammed as a prophet difficult, when Mohammed and his teachings are presented as the final and universal norm. Muslims never tire to assure Christians that Mohammed is the last messenger from God and “the seal of the prophets”, whose coming was predicted by Moses and Jesus. Furthermore, they state that it is one of the central teachings of Islam that Mohammed is the prophet God sent to *all* nations. The Qur’an, they say, is the unchanged, verbatim message Mohammed received bit by bit over a period of 21-22 years through the Angel Gabriel from God, and which he wrote down faithful to each letter. The Qur’an is thus said to be binding for all nations of all times. All other messages proclaimed by any other authentic prophet are *only valid for a certain nation for a certain period in time*. According to Islamic faith the prophets before Mohammad, including Jesus (*‘Īsà ibn Maryam*) are Mohammed’s harbingers or representatives. Practically all forms of Islam teach that these prophets accepted Mohammed’s prophetic leadership and his superiority quasi in advance.

Christians don’t find even a hint of a prediction of the coming of the prophet Mohammed in their sacred writings, although some Muslims are convinced that the verses from St John’s gospel (14,16-17) in which Jesus promises the coming of a comforter, the paraclete, are to be interpreted as the prediction of the future coming of Mohammed.

Furthermore, Christians do not share the Muslim belief that Jesus, like Mohammed, had received revelatory scripture, the *injīl*, from God through the angel *Jibrīl* (Gabriel). On the contrary, Christians believe that the person of Jesus himself is the final revelation from God, which cannot be superseded.

If one wants to carry out such a “structural” comparison at all, one could say: The position Jesus occupies in Christian faith as the timeless and uncreated Word co-existent with God, can be compared to the position the Qur’an occupies in the Muslim faith, in as far as it is believed to be the uncreated word of God. It would be possible to say that, according to Muslim faith, in the Qur’an the Word of God as it were has become book (inlibration as against incarnation).

Because of their faith Christians are therefore unable to agree to the Qur'an's claim, and thus the Muslim claim, that Jesus is a representative of Mohammed, and that he had been commissioned to bring a message to one specific nation at one specific time in history. Rather, in the Christian faith Jesus is the decisive revelation of God for all people at all times and in all places. In him God, in sovereign freedom, has created solidarity with mankind. This shows that the above mentioned Muslim beliefs about Mohammed and the Qur'an are not acceptable to Christians, and that they cannot be a mutual playing field between Christians and Muslims.

### **Is there a middle ground in this question?**

From the beginning of the last century some catholic theologians have been developing certain new perspectives and attempting to uncover principles which might make it possible to recognize Mohammed as a prophet. In terms of the powerful *prophetic experience* that marks the beginning of this major movement of Islam, it was argued that it is possible to call Mohammed a prophet.

From this perspective, however, the term prophet assumes a new meaning, which I believe to be different from the biblical as well as the Qur'an's meaning of the word. The question to be asked is: do those who understand the word of the prophet as explained above, also support absolute obedience to the prophet and his teachings? Or do they leave it to the individual to select at will from the prophet's teachings and leave the rest alone?

Much depends on how we deal with the undeniable fact that, from the Christian point of view, the message of the Prophet of Islam contains obvious theological errors. Certainly there exists the opinion that ultimately the message of the Qur'an would not contain anything that contradicts the Christian message. In other words, the rejections and condemnations of the Qur'an would refer only to distorted depictions of Christianity, which Christians also reject. Also, there are those who don't mind that a prophetic message contains doctrinally dubious statements. Furthermore, some occasionally ask: do doctrinal statements still matter in this day and age?

One point must be made without a doubt: Muslims react in a very emotional and negative way when the term prophet is devalued in whatever shape or form. Let me give an example: At the second congress in Cordoba (21<sup>st</sup>-27<sup>th</sup> March 1977) a Christian speaker, Prof. Gregorio Ruiz, presented an overview of the meanings of the word prophet. He explained that today the term has a rather broad meaning. It describes a person with extraordinary insight and intuition, who is sensitive to specific situations in society and who has left a lasting impression in history. In this sense, for example, Karl Marx (1818-1883) could be called a prophet. He added that he personally had no problem to call Mohammed a prophet in this sociological sense. It is not surprising that the majority of Muslims present at this large conference could not agree with this view and the parallels depicted. On the contrary, they were rather offended.<sup>1</sup>

Would it then be preferable to speak of Mohammed as a prophet more or less akin to the great prophets of the Old Covenant? It is hardly likely that Muslims would be happy with this option. Many of them say: if a Christian says that Mohammed is a prophet, without subsequently becoming a Muslim, then he either does not understand his own (Christian) faith or he is a hypocrite.

### **Critical openness to Muhammad's life and teachings.**

Our question does not simply concern a word or the title "prophet", but the confession and the acceptance of the truth the title "prophet" describes and which is the second part of the Muslim creed. For Christians Mohammed cannot be a "prophet" in the sense this title has in the Qur'an and therefore in the Muslim faith. To accept Mohammed in the sense of the Qur'an and of Islam as a prophet means simply: to accept the teachings of the Qur'an about Mohammed and about Mohammed's claim to be a prophet, and therefore also to consider the life of Mohammed to be a "beautiful and good model" (*uswa hasana*, 33, 21) for ones own life and the life of all people.

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<sup>1</sup> See also: Emilio Galindo Aguilar, „The Second International Muslim-Christian Congress of Cordoba (March 21-27, 1977)“ in: *Islamochristiana*, 3 (1977), pp. 207-228. As to the reactions to the lecture of Prof. Ruiz see *ibid*, p. 214.

At the same time, and as already indicated, Christians will distance themselves decisively from any libel and condemnation of Mohammed, but will attempt to recognize and honor his exceptional historic persona, his role as the founder of Islam and his place in the faith, the piety and the religious thinking of Muslims. They will then explain whether, as faithful Christians, they can only reject Mohammed's teachings and his life, or whether these do not, after all, powerfully bring to light major aspects of God's truth – that truth which Christians for their part see reflected in the light of human reason, made visible in the faith in the person and the teachings of Jesus Christ.

Ultimately, this essay therefore follows the Qur'an's own request (5, 47) to the "people of the gospel" to "discern what God has sent down in him" (*liyahlkum ahl al-indschil bimā anzala Allāhu fīhi*), in other words, to discern which aspects of Mohammed's life and teachings are acceptable for believing Christians, maybe even exemplary and worthy of admiration, and which aspects, from the point of view of the Christian faith, appear questionable, unacceptable and requiring salvation.

### **The option of the Qur'an and of Muhammad for political power**

Our statements about the life and the teachings of Mohammed are based on the text of the Qur'an, which we read in the context of the fundamental information provided in the classical biography Mohammed's (*sīra*, especially the book: *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* by Ibn Ishāq [ca. 704-767] Edition Ibn Hishām [died. 833]<sup>2</sup>, also the earliest Qur'an commentaries discussing the "occasion of revelation" (*asbāb al-nuzūl*). No evaluation of the phenomenon of the messenger (*rasūl*) can avoid engagement with his message (*risāla*) as it is given to us in the text of the Qur'an. We take the Qur'an to be the text which Mohammed believed to be revealed by God, the statements of which wholly reflect his beliefs. In other words, whatever the Qur'an says we take to be Mohammed's message and teaching.

Everything in the Qur'an is to be understood as revelation in the name of the Lord (see sura 96). From the first sura revealed in AD 609 and 610 to the last ones revealed in 632 the Qur'an represents claims and challenges for those it addresses. It

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<sup>2</sup> Trans. into English by A. Guillaume (Oxford: OUP, 1955)

requires of them to believe in Mohammed's appointed mission from God and defends the origin of this mission as directly from God against any possible question and doubt.

The Christian observer and student must primarily consider the quality of the confrontation, even the enmity between prophet and his audience. It is important to comprehend the breadth of the truth that defines the battleground, as well as the factors which cause the hostile argument. It is not about the "whether" but the "how" of the confrontation. The question is: to which extent does the Qur'an's message as given by Mohammed correspond with the means Mohammed chose to achieve supremacy of his message in his times and in his sphere of influence. The *hijra* in 622 is the linchpin in the prophet's history, the corner stone of the Qur'an and of the prophetic career: the *hijra* initiates Mohammed's prophetic leadership.

What is the core of the message, which caused the antagonism, even the open enmity, between the prophet and the people in Mecca? The basic tenets of this message are easily named. First, the request for unconditional recognition of the one and only God and, implied in this, the condemnation of polytheism and idolatry as foolishness; second, the proclamation of the reality that all people without exception will be subject to God's judgment, and thus their call away from comfortable forgetfulness and away from any other form of irresponsible living. His audience accused Mohammed of being "crazy" (81, 22), no longer a mere "soothsayer" (52, 29), a simple "poet" (37, 35; 52, 30), a copier of "tales from the past" (68, 15), of using "magic" (cf. 43, 30). If God had appointed someone, then surely he would have appointed a powerful personality, a "man who is prominent" (43, 31). Someone like that would have had more credibility than this Mohammed. Furthermore, Mohammed was accused of destroying the old tradition and of denigrating the forefathers (43, 21-23).

For over ten years Mohammed suffered derision, defamation, conspiracy and accusation. The stories of the patriarchs in the Qur'an therefore strongly reflect the virtue of faithful suffering and perseverance for God's sake. However, they also reflect the final triumph of the career and message of the patriarchs. The texts of these early Mecca years are also influenced by the sharp dichotomy between those led into truth on the one hand, and those who err (*muslimūn* and *kāfirūn*), those who accept

the message and those who turn away from it, the winners and the losers. The writings clearly condemn the hardening of the hearts of those who listen to the prophet, and their resistance against the truth of his message, and threaten them with the coming final judgment and its punishments.

### **Emigration from Mecca (hijra)**

In view to the hardening opposition during the late Mecca years, the Qur'an and his trusted prophet Mohammed moved towards hijra (emigration, not flight!), away from the restrictive confrontation with the rigid rejection of his own tribe, the Quraysh, and away from mere preaching, towards fighting by means of physical force. After thirteen years of patient witness by word alone, and in the light of rejection of Muhammad and his claim from the society of Mecca, who resisted him proudly and proved to be incorrigible, Mohammed opted for emigration. The failure of God's word and frustration of the "manifest victory" (*al-fath al-mubīn*) of the "religion of truth" was inconceivable and was not allowed to happen under any circumstances. In other words, failure had to be averted by any possible means.

To understand the emigration from Mecca (*hijra*) as failure, as though Mohammed had cast aside his calling and his responsibility, is a misunderstanding. Rather, looked at from the whole of the Qur'an's message, hijra is the obedient consequence of this calling. With the invitation to Yathrib/Medina and the promise to defend him and his prophetic claims, Muhammad and his followers received a unique opportunity to go united into self-imposed exile to create a solid foundation, an instrument with which the still neutral tribes and people in Yathrib could be converted to Islam by means of diplomatic skill and political pressure. It began to look possible that Mecca, which had refused to turn to Islam and its messenger, but which had not been able to prevent the messenger's emigration, would eventually be vulnerable to the returning exiles.

With his battles, the battle of Badr (624), Uhud (625) and the battle of the trench (627) Mohammed simply followed the basic logic of questioning the power of the tribe governing Mecca, the Quraysh, and the attack on this tribe who were protectors of the pagan faith and its structures. From the beginning this radical questioning of the power of the pagan rulers of Mecca had been one of the aims and a sign of Mohammed's mission. After the victory of Badr, which is described in the Qur'an as

*yawm al-furqān* (the Day of Distinction, also Day of Decision, 8, 41) it became important to strengthen Medina's resources in steady, partly politically religious and partly military consolidation, to increase Mohammed's reputation, to conquer the surrounding tribes and finally, to return victoriously to Mecca.

For the non-Muslims of Medina the conflict resulted in suspicions or accusations of secretly agreeing with the opponents, or even of cooperating with them. Even neutrality became suspicious. The Jewish tribes of Medina were under particular suspicion, because the prophet's initial assumption that they would accept him turned out to have been erroneous. The forced banishments, the confiscation of property and the dispersion of the tribes are the saddest chapters of the *sīra* and the Qur'an. The most memorable victims were the Jewish tribes Banū Nadīr, the Qaynuqā` and the Qurayza, whereby the latter suffered the execution of all their male members and the sale of all their women and children into slavery, with Mohammed's specific approval.<sup>3</sup>

Yes, one can and should see beyond individual episodes, even if they are as tragic as those mentioned here, and include in the assessment the whole complex of tribal ritual, cultural psychology and legal regulations, as well as the collective strategy of war situations. The harshness of the punishment could thus be legitimated and the accusation could be qualified. However, the more strongly these circumstances are used as explanations and even excuses, the more pressing the deep theological problem: How can the believer combine the Qur'an's endorsement and the use of political and military force by the prophet with the claim of Qur'an and *sīra* to final religious validity?

The armed *jihād* against Mecca led to victory and at the same time to *islām*, the act of subjugation of the conquered to the reign of Allah, as well as his prophet and his umma. The bloody battles of the first of the caliphs immediately after Mohammed's death showed the extent of fragility of tribe's *islām*, which was often no more than external subjugation to the power of the messenger, but lacking true faith. (cf. sura 49, 4).

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<sup>3</sup> Johan Bouman, *Der Koran und die Juden* (Darmstadt, 1990), pp. 69-92, esp. pp. 85-86.

The ancient inscription of Mohammed's grave in Medina:

*„Peace be upon thee, O Apostle. We witness that thou hast truly delivered the message, that thou hast striven in the way of God until God glorified His religion and perfected it.”<sup>4</sup>*

expresses poignantly the vital unity of the witness of the Word and the political and military efforts in the life and teaching of Mohammed and therefore in our understanding of the Qur'an.

### **The political and military dimension of Mohammed's life and teaching**

When Muslims seek Christian acceptance of Mohammed they cannot avoid serious engagement with the historical information in the *sīra* and the corresponding texts in the Qur'an, and their normative meaning in the overall Islamic vision of faith. Islamic mystics and modern Muslim idealists use different methods of abstracting from the political and the military dimensions, i.e. the *jihād*-dimension of the *sīra* and the corresponding texts in the Qur'an. But no picture of Mohammed can ultimately set aside or negate historic facts and their claim to be normative, and a Christian assessment of Mohammed must take account of this dimension in his life and his message. The fundamental problem Christians have with regard to Mohammed's own understanding of his mission is the use of violence because of holy indignation over the rejection of the authority of God and his prophet. From a biblical-prophetic and Christian point of view, the prophetic mission, in as far as it is implemented with using political and military force, loses those qualities of truth and justice it tried to justify.

The important contemporary thinker Fazlur Rahman (1919-1988) does not share this view:

“Mohammed never lost his hope for success, nor the truly terrible and brutal recognition that the requirement to be successful had been *his God given duty*. It is a component of the Qur'an's teaching that the mere bringing of the message, the experience of disappointment and the suffering of failure represent an immature spirituality.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Cragg, Muhammad, p. 26.

<sup>5</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* (Chicago & London, 1979), p. 16, also p. 21.

The question here is what, precisely, we are to understand by the terms “immature” and “spirituality”. In this context it is important to note that the Qur’an, and therefore Mohammed, simply turns the politically active patriarchs and judges of the Old Testament into true representatives of prophetic action: Moses, David, Abraham, the iconoclast. They are all of them heroes of success, examples for the prophet of Islam, while the “Muslim’s holy scriptures are utterly silent on the patient servants of the Word, on Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and especially Jeremiah, all of whom turn away from power for the sake of the integrity of the Word, and who passionately believe that it is better to fail honorably than to obtain dishonorable success.”<sup>6</sup>

This silence is not an accident, it corresponds with the norms and the spirit of the Qur’an. If the Qur’an and Mohammed’s prophesies had included Jeremiah and all the suffering servants of biblical tradition, it would have resulted in an intolerable questioning of firm Muslim basic convictions, as they are expressed so clearly in Fazlur Rahman’s statement. To turn it around: Mohammed does not stand in the tradition of the prophets who have become decisive for our picture of biblical prophets and the character of their message.

According to our conviction, the faithful “mere” delivering of the message (*balāgh*), which Rahman so categorically condemns as an indication of immature spirituality, does not expose someone to the temptation to claim that which is God’s alone (see sura 3, 79-80) in the same way as the forceful implementation of the message by the determined use of force and violent means. The temptation to claim that which is God’s alone threatens especially the messenger and the message, when they apply political and military force. Such political and military might requires and justifies self interest as well as enmity, which in turn spoil and darken the message. In order to retain his freedom of witness of God’s Word, Jeremiah “had to” ensure his own freedom of thought and to fight strongly against any possible political instrumentalization of his person and his message. Ultimately, he paid the price for this.

Also to be taken into account is that prophetic refusal to use force and violence is correlative to God’s wish to receive a genuine answer to his invitation and his will from mankind. This answer must be based solely on love, not on the fear of punishment and the consequences people would have to fear from the prophet’s hand if

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<sup>6</sup> K. Cragg, Muhammad, S. 43.

they rejected the call. The prophet's suffering in the service of the Word is no more and no less than his partnership with godly grace in its inherent abstinence from any force (*lā ikrāha fī'l-dīn*, sura 2, 256) in the face of violent rejection of God's will by mankind.

This explains why Muslim thinkers interpret the fact that Jesus' prophetic path does not include a political and military dimension as a "privation" forced on him by the Romans, and not the perfect and final form of prophetic existence and prophetic fate.<sup>7</sup> Kenneth Cragg fittingly comments this question alluding to Paul's famous statement in 1 Corinthians 1, 24: "according to the description of the Qur'an God's power and wisdom are not seen in the crucifixion of His servant Jesus, but in his rescue from the same."<sup>8</sup>

Christian thinking, which has been shaped by the teachings of the Gospel, will always consider it to be a burden and a tragedy, that violence and the resulting force are so firmly and unquestioningly anchored in the normative sources, in the exemplary biography of the prophet of Islam. The pattern of Mohammed's *sīra*, from the hijra as conscious emigration to the final glorious conquering of Mecca, are in conflict to the way of Jesus the messiah: via the humiliation of the cross to the resurrection, whose visible power and glory will only break out and shine fully in the coming world. From the living origins onwards there remains a disparity between Jesus and Mohammed.

### **Qur'an and Mohammad measured against the benchmark of the Gospels**

We will not engage here in the traditional controversial critique of the central topic of this centuries old controversy, such as corruption (*tahrīf*) or the reliability of biblical writing, displacement (*naskh*) of Jesus' authority through Mohammed, the way to the resurrection via the cross, and finally the question of the definitiveness of the prophet and the message – although these topics will require continued discussion. Instead we begin with the central doctrine of the Qur'an and of Mohammed himself: the truth of God and humankind. Christology and the doctrine of salvation are to be rooted where the deepest convictions of Islam and Christianity meet. There is a greater hope of being heard by our honestly enquiring Muslim discussion partners, if

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<sup>7</sup> Vgl. Ahmad Schawqi, *Al-Schawqiyāt* (Cairo1948), quoted in Cragg, *Muhammad*, S. 46.

we place our questions regarding Mohammed's and therefore the Qur'an's message in a context that is their own. Maybe then Christian beliefs can be understood at the level that is so vital for the understanding of the deepest basic convictions of Islam from the point of view of the Christian faith.

The central concern of Islam is primarily to lead humankind on the right path before and to God. When we consider and describe the central concerns of the Gospel based on Islamic affirmations, we are not primarily defending Christianity. Rather, based on the relevant teachings of the Qur'an, we are concerned with the representation of God's sovereignty and "justification" of humankind as described in the gospels.

With this approach we are closer to Paul's own thinking and method: "for we do not preach ourselves but Jesus Christ the Lord, and ourselves as your slaves for the sake of Jesus" (2 Corinthians 4:5). From the perspective of the Christian faith we therefore ask: Is the depiction of God's sovereignty in the Qur'an sufficiently complete, deep and consistent? Can the Qur'an's understanding of the definitiveness of a message that does not go beyond the law truly convince us? Is the person who, according to the Qur'an is on the right path, completely and truly experiencing salvation?

Beginning and ending our conversation about Mohammed and the Qur'an with God, we cannot go wrong. It will help if we begin with the Qur'an's belief in Mohammed as the "seal of the prophets" and the Qur'an as the "seal of prophecy". According to the Qur'an prophecy reaches its pinnacle in guidance, teaching, directive, warning and exhortation. Understood in this way the relevance of the creator is largely limited to the educational. The Qur'an sees prophets as the tutors of humankind. God's tuition illuminates, informs, guides, encourages and warns. It disciplines, prevents and binds. The whole world is a school. God's guidance through the prophet, who is God's "representative" (*khalifa*, sura 2, 30; 38, 26) instructs people to live a righteous life. In this consists the duty and the dignity of the person correctly guided.

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<sup>8</sup> Cragg, *Muhammad*, S. 46.

## Creation, revelation and Lawgiving in the Qur'an

However laudable and magnificent the Qur'an's statements about God, creation and the law may be, compared with the revelation in Jesus Christ they are incomplete and fragmentary. Is guidance from God truly all that humankind requires? Is there not to be a "more"? Does the teaching of the law through prohibition and commandment fulfill the deepest intentions of the law and the law maker? Do the biblical prophets and Jesus not help us to discover dimensions in God's sovereignty, which go far beyond the categories of "education" and "commandment"?

Matthew 11, 9 tells us: "more than a prophet." This „more“ determines the whole of the New Testament. It is the "more" of the messianic actions towards salvation. It is the "more" of God's loving engagement, beyond the educational and disciplinary measures of the law that has always been rejected by humankind and will always be rejected. It is the "more" of the coming of God himself in flesh and in person, in suffering and in salvation – far beyond the spoken word.

Guidance (*hudā*) and the Law (*sharī'a*) do have their dignity and their benefit. However, the question is whether they provide a final and "ultimately effective" answer to mankind's continued half-heartedness, rebellion against the law, even the questioning of the claims made by the law and the law maker, up to and including pseudo-worship and a life altogether without God (*min dūni'llāh* 2, 107)? Because despite God's guidance, threats and punishments the core sins continue: Hardness of heart, hypocrisy, pride, the admiration of oneself. What can guidance achieve in the face of the depths of evil in humankind, in view to those people who ignore the guidance and make themselves immune against it? Is prophecy the only, unique and final means to heal these wounds of humanity? Only those who underestimate the seriousness of mankind's situation and the extent of God's authority will simply answer this with yes. The Gospels teach us to understand that the creed *Allāhu Akbar* (*Deus semper major; God is always greater!*) has to be understood broader and deeper. Such a deep understanding of the true greatness of God should therefore be the main and most stimulating topic of theological conversation between Christi

ans and Muslims. The issue is noting less than the core belief about God in our respective faiths!

In sura 6, 91 it is said of the Jews of Medina: "They have never valued God as He should be valued." The Gospel of Christ says that pointing to God's transcendence alone is insufficient to value God. The emphasis on God's transcendence "must" be balanced and extended by another: the emphasis on God's involvement visible in God's "uniting of His own self" with humankind, beings of endless yearning and magnanimity, but also of weakness and the addiction to the power of sin.

Through Mohammed, the Qur'an also speaks strongly of God's closeness to humankind: "We are closer to him than his jugular vein" (50:16). The Qur'an thinks about this closeness in conjunction with distance and aloofness, which are matched by the submission and compliance of creation. The Gospels, however, speak of yet another dimension of God's transcendence. Of a dimension that is realized in God's love, of the connection of God with humankind solely because of grace. Is it possible that Islam has suffered a tragic loss as a consequence of its pronounced rejection of any idol worship as well as any connection of people with idols, in view to what we must call God's association with humankind through grace? Maybe this loss resulted precisely from the prophet's urgent and uncompromising call to denounce God's association with idols. Christians will ask whether God's transcendence is not most truly retained and valued when we defend it not only against pagan idols, but against all human sin. According to Christian understanding, *Allāhu Akbar* ("God is the greatest") is a cry of joy about God's gift of salvation from sin, the ultimate healing of sin's deadly sting. The cry is more than a mere triumph over polytheism.

There can be no doubt that Muslims and Christians are united in their faith in the one God. The Christian faith, however, says: "there is an immediate and unlimited concern from God in the wellbeing of humankind. For God, creation also means risk, obligation, even God's free entering into a kind of liability.

Creation includes a plan from God: It is aimed at cooperation, at *islām*, at the submission of the created to which God calls them and which is the creature's appropriate response. This intended free response of people in submission and devotion

cannot be automatic, nor is it guaranteed. Puppets do not need prophets. That which God the creator has given through his Guidance as His will for humankind must in turn also be wanted by humankind. But if that is how creation is enacted, does it then go hand in hand with a kind of “immunity”, with a kind of invulnerability and in this sense of “exaltedness” of God vis-à-vis humanity caught up deeply in error and in sin, as the Qur’an does not tire to point out?

The same logic applies to God, the God of revelation and giver of the law, because guidance and law are at one with creation and express its goals. It can be said that there is, in principle, no divergence between Mohammed’s and Jesus’ teachings regarding God’s involvement with human affairs. The debate centers around its expression and extent only. Do transcendence and God’s greatness on the one hand and God’s radical involvement with humankind on the other truly have to be seen as contrary and competing with each other? In other words, does God’s way of looking after humankind have to be limited to the law, legal exhortation and judgment?

Christ’s standard goes further, right up to the grace of self-giving in the incarnation and in suffering love. While the Qur’an does not entirely reject salvation as not consistent with God’s sovereignty, the Gospels’ life rests in God’s free gift in Jesus Christ. Christians believe that our faith in the always greater God makes it impossible to reject this gift as too improbable. The Christian faith ascribes to God’s greatness an ultimate freedom that has only one dimension - self giving love. In the face of the Qur’an’s claim that God was not allowed to and could not do more than to send a prophet, the Christian belief proclaims God as the one who comes and gives himself in logos-love.

The image of God in the Qur’an and revealed by Mohammed leaves no room for a suffering God. Suffering is something put onto God externally, which limits and disgraces him. God therefore has to be seen as free from suffering and incapable of pain. God’s freedom from suffering understood in this way is something Christians can agree with. However, in the Christian proclamation of God as the Father of the crucified a love is shown which, completely sovereign and free, suffers purely for love. Seen in this way, in the light of the core meaning of creation and prophesy which has been shown to us by the revelation of Jesus, God’s sovereignty is que

stioned much more deeply when a faith, however pious, prohibits God to use all his sovereignty against all evil through the all conquering majesty of his descending love, right up to Gethsemane and Golgotha. From the Christian point of view the concern about God's immunity from risk, relationship and sharing in suffering is, paradoxically, the "infidel" proclamation of a misunderstood godly unity.

In conclusion we should say: Mohammed is an outstanding religious and political founder figure, who has led many people to God, but who has not recognized the love of God and the greatness of his call to humankind, which has been shown in the life, suffering, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ.