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978-0-521-03928-4 - Quranic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis

Jane Dammen McAuliffe

Excerpt

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Introduction

The question of religious self-definition and that of interreligious understanding continue to intrigue contemporary historians of religions. The first seeks to determine how particular religious traditions have defined themselves at various periods in their histories. The second inquires about ways in which one tradition perceives, or has perceived, another. Self-reflective concerns cede prominence to external investigations. The lines cross, of course, at those points where one tradition attempts to distinguish itself from another. In such instances interreligious understanding, by a kind of *via negativa*, becomes self-definition.

The focus of the present study will be this question of interreligious understanding as undertaken within a Muslim context. In particular, the Islamic understanding of Christians will be probed. As the youngest of the three “Abrahamic” faiths, Islam from its inception developed in both confrontation and conversation with Jews and Christians. The gradual clarification of differences among these traditions generated a vast polemical literature on all three fronts. This literature, in turn, bases itself upon and draws its lines of argument from a rich scriptural heritage.

The primary source for the Muslim understanding of Christianity is the revelation vouchsafed to Muḥammad, the Qurʾān. While the still-vigorously debated questions of the Qurʾān’s compilation and early exegesis will be discussed later, it is important at the outset to clarify that conception of the Qurʾān which undergirds this study. For the committed Muslim, the Qurʾān represents the word of God as revealed, or ‘sent down’, to His prophet, Muḥammad. It is not, then, for Muslims, a book like other books, or a mere part – even if an obviously important part – of their religious literature. Rather it is a revelation, a divine disclosure, to which special, even unique, treatment must be accorded. As God’s own word, Qurʾānic statements are normative for the thought and behavior of Muslims. Any effort to comprehend the Islamic understanding of Christians and Christianity must begin therein.

Within the Qurʾān may be found two general categories of statements relative to Christianity. The first speaks of the Christians (under various designations) as a particular religious group. The second includes allusions

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to Christian figures, especially Jesus and Mary, and to the theological indictments that have fueled the long-standing quarrel of Muslim-Christian polemic. Much has been written and continues to be written about this polemic and its principal theological preoccupations.¹ What Christians term the doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity, but what Muslims have frequently excoriated as the blasphemies of divine reproduction and tritheism, remain but the most prominent of these. There has also been no lack of studies on the Qurʾānic depiction of Jesus (and of Mary), some clearly motivated by a desire for Muslim-Christian rapprochement.² The place that Jesus occupies in Muslim piety and eschatology is a further development of this Qurʾānic prominence and has been studied by both Muslim and Christian scholars. No commensurate degree of attention, however, has been paid to those statements in the Qurʾān that refer to Christians as a social and religious group.

The number of such references is surprisingly large. Calculation of the precise sum depends upon issues of interpretation, for a variety of phrases

1 The most comprehensive bibliographic source for Muslim writings on Christianity and Christian writings on Islam may be found in the journal issued in Rome by the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies, *Islamochristiana*. These have been published by Robert Caspar and his collaborators under the title “Bibliographie du dialogue islamo-chrétien” in the following volumes: 1 (1975): 125–81; 2 (1976): 187–249; 3 (1977): 255–86; 4 (1978): 247–67; 5 (1979): 299–317; 6 (1980): 259–99; 7 (1981): 299–307; 10 (1984): 273–92.

2 The Qurʾānic depiction of Jesus has been studied by a number of authors. Significant monographs include: Henri Michaud, *Jésus selon le Coran* (Neuchâtel: Éditions Delachaux et Niestlé, 1960); Geoffrey Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qurʾān* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1965); Donald Roland Rickards, “A Study of the Quranic References to ‘Isā in the Light of *Tafsīr* and *Ḥadīth*,” Ph.D. diss., Hartford Seminary Foundation, 1969; Heikki Räisänen, *Das Koranische Jesusbild: ein Beitrag zur Theologie des Korans* (Helsinki: Missiologian ja Ekumeniikan, 1971); Olaf H. Schumann, *Der Christus der Muslime: christologische Aspekte in der arabisch-islamischen Literatur* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1975); Kenneth Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1985). Don Wismer has produced a book-length bibliography entitled *The Islamic Jesus: An Annotated Bibliography of Sources in English and French* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1977). Miguel Asín Palacios has collected the sayings attributed to Jesus that can be found in the works of Muslim authors of the classical period such as Abū ‘Umar b. ‘Abd Rabbih (d. 328/940), Abū al-Layth al-Samarqandī (d. 373/983–84), and Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 386/998). See his “Logia et Agrapha Domini Jesu apud Moslemicos Sciptores,” *Patrologia Orientalia* 13 (1919): 332–432 and 19 (1926): 529–624.

Studies on Mary have been fewer. Useful information is presented in Jean Abd el-Jalil, *Marie et l’Islam* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1950); Nilo Geagea, *Mary of the Koran: A Meeting Point Between Christianity and Islam*, trans. and ed. by Lawrence T. Fares (New York: Philosophical Library, 1984); and my “Chosen of All Women: Mary and Fāṭima in Qurʾānic Exegesis.” *Islam* 7 (1981): 19–28. David Kerr has drawn upon these works and others in his recent “Mary, Mother of Jesus, in the Islamic Tradition: A Theme for Christian-Muslim Dialogue,” *Newsletter of the Office on Christian-Muslim Relations* 39 (1988): 1–9.

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are used to designate the Christians both separately and in combination with the Jews.³ Most obvious is, of course, the Arabic noun *al-naṣārā*, the common Qurʾānic term for Christians, which is found seven times in *sūrat al-baqarah* (2), five times in *sūrat al-māʾidah* (5), and once each in *sūrat al-tawbah* (9) and *sūrat al-ḥajj* (22).⁴ Less direct designations are those that highlight the common scriptural heritage of Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Of most frequent occurrence is the phrase *ahl al-kitāb* ('people of the book'), which is found more than thirty times in the Qurʾān. This ordinarily signifies, unless otherwise qualified, both Christians and Jews. Other phrases that bear such dual signification also indicate in various ways the reception of divinely inspired scripture. Examples include: "those who were given the book (*alladhīna ūtū al-kitāb*)," "those to whom We gave the book (*alladhīna ātaynāhum al-kitāb*)," "those who were given a portion of the book (*alladhīna ūtū naṣībān min al-kitāb*)," and "those who read the book before you (*alladhīna yaqraʿūna al-kitāb min qablika*)." An additional category of designation – and one more unambiguously applicable to the Christians – includes the verses that refer to Jesus and then subsequently mention his 'followers' by such phrases as "those who follow you (*alladhīna ittabaʿūka*)" or "those who follow him (*alladhīna ittabaʿūhu*)." Such are certain to bedevil scholars who rely only on concordances to collect all relevant citations for a subject; as would also another group that includes only associative references to Christians. An example of the latter is to be found in *sūrat al-māʾidah* (5):66 and will be treated at length in Chapter 6. In this instance reference to the Torah and Gospel is associated with the approbatory label, "a balanced people (*ummatun muqtaṣidatun*)."

Given the state of reference materials in the field of Islamic studies, collecting all of the verses that refer to the Christians involves a combination of several tasks. These include careful reading of the Qurʾānic text itself, use of the available concordances and indices, and – as will become clear in this study – repeated reference to the major products of the Islamic exegetical tradition.⁵ Once collected, the verses or groups of verses begin

3 Various indices to the Qurʾān are surveyed in Willem A. Bijlefeld, "Some Recent Contributions to Qurʾānic Studies: Selected Publications in English, French and German, 1964–1973," *MW* 64 (1974): 79–102.

4 As Muslim writers generally cite the divisions of the Qurʾān by name rather than number, that convention will be respected in this book, with the numerical designation placed afterward in parentheses. Except for some minor modification, transliteration of Arabic and Persian follows the system adopted by the Library of Congress.

5 The most useful concordance to the Qurʾān is that of Muḥammad Fuʾād ʿAbd al-Bāqī entitled *al-Muʿjam al-mufabras li-alfāz al-Qurʾān al-karīm* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, n.d.), which reproduces the full phrase in which a word is found. A popular, earlier work that gives only *sūrah* and verse citation for each entry is that of Gustav Flügel, *Concordantiae Corani Arabicae* (Leipzig: C. Tauchnitz, 1842). Hanna E. Kassis has

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to fall into several categories. (Again, it must be noted that Christians are frequently mentioned in combination with reference to the Jews and others through the use of such inclusive phrases as “people of the book [*ahl al-kitāb*],” “those who were given the book [*alladhīna ūtū al-kitāb*],” etc.) Direct or indirect criticism of Christians constitutes the largest category.⁶ Persistent charges condemn Christians for being untrustworthy and internally divisive. Further accusations censure them for boasting, for deliberately or inadvertently corrupting their scripture, for trying to lead Muslims astray, and for being unfaithful to Jesus’ message. A second grouping can be made of those verses that seek to prescribe Muslim behavior toward Christians both socially and economically, such as reference to the collection of a special tax, the *jizyah*, levied on the Christians (and others of the *ahl al-kitāb*), and reference to the protection of existing churches and cloisters. Verses that make ostensibly positive remarks about the Christians compose the final category and the focus of this investigation.

These positive allusions to the Christians are scattered throughout the Qurʾān and a number have been persistently extracted to serve as proof-texts of Muslim religious tolerance. Several contemporary examples should suffice to convey the range of such efforts. One traces Islam’s “age-old tolerance to Christian and Jewish communities” to the Qurʾānic praise of Christians in *sūrat al-māʾidah* (5):82.⁷ Another remarks that there are “certain passages in the Qurʾān which might be regarded as conciliatory towards Christians.”⁸ Two Muslim scholars draw upon these verses to emphasize

recently published a handsomely produced English concordance keyed to A.J. Arberry’s translation of the Qurʾān. See *A Concordance of the Qurʾān* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983). An ingenious, thematic index to the Qurʾān is that of Michel Allard, which consists of 430 punched cards with accompanying code and commentary. See *Analyse conceptuelle du Coran sur cartes perforées* (Paris: Mouton, 1963). This project receives theoretical reconsideration in G. Laroussi, “Enonciation et stratégies discursives dans le Coran,” *AT* 2/3 (1982): 121–71.

6 For a list of such Qurʾānic criticism see Abdelmajid Charfi, “Christianity in the Qurʾān Commentary of Ṭabarī,” *Islam* 6 (1980): 134–38. This article is a translation by Penelope C. Johnstone from *Revue Tunisienne des Sciences Sociales* 58/59 (1979): 53–96. A French translation by Robert Caspar was published in *MIDEO* 16 (1983): 117–61.

7 William Stoddart, *Sufism: The Mystical Doctrines and Methods of Islam* (Wellingborough, England: Thorsons Publishers, 1976), 35. Stoddart omits from his citation of this verse – with no indication that he is doing so – the condemnatory statement about the Jews, presumably because to include it would contradict his interpretation of the verse. Drawing upon the work of Rudi Paret, Josef van Ess distinguishes between the Qurʾānic condemnation of the Jews for moral reasons and of Christians on dogmatic grounds. With this in mind, he finds in 5:82 an instance where “the actual behavior of Christians comes close to being praised.” See “Islamic Perspectives,” in *Christianity and the World Religions: Paths of Dialogue with Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism (Christentum und Weltreligionen)*, ed. by Hans Küng et al., trans. by Peter Heinegg (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1986), 101.

8 Kenneth Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956),

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that “the tolerant spirit of Islam is apparent in its recognition of other religions” and that in “times of prosperity and security from external dangers, this tolerant attitude was the hallmark of Muslim-Christian relations.”⁹

A final instance proves yet more emphatic: “These passages recognize the worth of other religions, if they had scriptures and believed in one God. They have been valuable in inculcating tolerance among Muslims in the past, and in modern times they have guided thought and action in the closer relationships that now obtain between all religions.”¹⁰

Such claims for a Qurʾānic message of religious tolerance, whether made by Muslims or by those presenting Muslims’ views, find their correlate in a predominantly Christian use of this same body of material. A contemporary Christian scholar has noted: “A number of well-known Qurʾānic texts, quoted frequently especially by Christians, seem to point in a different direction, as they supposedly substantiate the thesis that – using intentionally non-Qurʾānic terminology – Christianity remains a way of salvation even after the coming of the Seal of the Prophets.”¹¹ Nor is such Christian use of these Qurʾānic texts of but recent vintage. Classical sources attest to its longevity. The fourteenth-century theologian and juriconsult Taqī al-Dīn b. Taymīyah (d. 728/1328)¹² saw fit to refute such Christian Qurʾānic interpretation in his treatise *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ li-man badala dīn al-masīḥ* (The Correct Response to Those Who Have Changed the Religion of the Messiah).¹³

260. This statement is reproduced with a minor reworking and a more gender-inclusive translation of the accompanying Qurʾānic example in the 2nd edition (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1985), 234.

9 Abdul Ali, “Tolerance in Islam,” *IC* 56 (1982): 110; Mahmoud M. Ayoub, “Roots of Muslim-Christian Conflict,” *MW* 79 (1989): 31.

10 Parrinder, *Jesus*, 154.

11 Bijliefeld, “Some Recent Contributions,” 94. More recently Simon Jargy has drawn upon such texts to argue that the *abl al-kitāb* have not been excluded from “l’économie du salut.” See *Islam et chrétienté: les fils d’Abraham entre la confrontation et le dialogue* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1981), 62. Similarly, Charles Kimball cites *sūrat al-baqarah* (2):62 to support the assertion that “the Qurʾān makes clear the salvific value inherent in at least some of the religious traditions.” “Striving Together in the Way of God: Muslim Participation in Christian-Muslim Dialogue,” (Ph.D. thesis, Harvard Divinity School, 1987), 31.

12 Names are given in their longer form and death dates are supplied only at the first mention of individuals, whether that be in the text or the notes. The exceptions to this procedure involve the ten Qurʾānic commentators whose biographies are treated at length.

13 4 vols. (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat al-Nīl, 1322/1905). Thomas F. Michel, S.J., has published a study and partial translation in his *A Muslim Theologian’s Response to Christianity* (Delmar, New York: Caravan Books, 1984). This treatise is, in large measure, a response to one by Paul of Antioch, a twelfth-century Melkite bishop of Sidon (now in Lebanon). The

The verses that generate such divergent assessments have been selected by following the procedure outlined above. Some were obvious candidates simply from a straightforward reading of the Qurʾānic text, while others were added after cross-checking the major concordances and indices. The conclusive test, however, of a verse's inclusion in this third category remains the testimony of Islamic exegesis (*tafsīr*).¹⁴ The final collection contains seven citations, to each of which a chapter of this book is devoted. Presented here in their textual order, the verse translations are offered as provisional renderings, for in some instances a considerable degree of Muslim exegetical effort has been expended through the centuries in an attempt to secure the precise meaning of a particular word or phrase. As any translation necessarily prejudices the results of such endeavor, those recorded herein should be read as tentative and subject to emendation in light of the full commentary tradition:

sūrat al-baqarab (2):62

Truly those who believe and those who are Jews, the Christians and the Ṣābiʿūn, whoever believes in God and the Last Day and does right, for them is their reward near their Lord; they will have no fear, neither will they grieve.

sūrah Āl ʿImrān (3):55

When God said, "O Jesus, I am the One who will take you and raise you to Me and cleanse you of those who disbelieve and place those who follow you over those who disbelieve until the Day of Resurrection. Then to Me is your return. I shall judge between you in that about which you disagree."

sūrah Āl ʿImrān (3):199

Truly among the people of the book are those who believe in God and what was

text and translation of Paul's work may be found in Paul Khoury, *Paul d'Antioche* (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1964).

14 Through a combination of the search procedures that have been mentioned, the following verses came to notice as potential candidates for inclusion in the category of positive allusions to the Christians: *sūrat al-baqarab* (2):121 and 253; *sūrah Āl ʿImrān* (3):75–76, 110, and 113–15; *sūrat al-māʿidab* (5):46–47 and 84–85; *sūrat al-ʿarāf* (7):181; *sūrah Yūnus* (10):94; *sūrat al-isrāʾ* (17):107–09; and *sūrat al-malāʾikab* (35):32. In all cases recourse to the exegetical literature, particularly al-Ṭabarī and Ibn al-Jawzī, revealed no sustained reference to the Christians as the principal interpretive focus for the relevant phrase of the verse. In most cases no mention at all was made of the Christians; in a few instances there was one short reference to the *ahl al-kitāb*.

The one passage for which a full exegetical survey was made is *sūrah Āl ʿImrān* (3):113–15, which begins: "They are not alike; among the *ahl al-kitāb* there is an upright people (*ummatun qāʾimatun*) who recite the verses of God in the night and they prostrate." Almost uniformly this was taken as an allusion to the Jews. The one exception is Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī who records, among a number of *ḥadīths*, a single one that refers to people from Najrān, Abyssinia, and Rūm. Although al-Rāzī does not name them as Christians in his exegesis of this verse, in the rest of the verses examined in this work such a reference has always been taken to mean the Christians. However, in this instance, as in the others, there was not sufficient exegetical evidence to view these as unequivocal allusions to the Christians.

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sent down to you and what was sent down to them, submissive before God. They do not sell the verses of God for a small price. For them is their reward near their Lord. Surely God is quick to reckon.

sūrat al-mā'idah (5):66

If they had adhered to the Torah and the Gospel and what was sent down to them from their Lord, they would have eaten from above them and from beneath their feet. Among them is a balanced people but many of them are evildoers.

sūrat al-mā'idah (5):82–83

You will find the people most intensely hostile to the believers are the Jews and the idolaters. You will surely find those closest in friendship to those who believe to be those who say "We are Christians." That is because among them are priests and monks and because they are not arrogant. (82)

When they heard what was sent down to the Messenger their eyes overflowed with tears because of what they recognized as the truth. They say, "Our Lord, we believe, so write us with those who testify." (83)

sūrat al-qasas (28):52–55

Those to whom We gave the book before it/him believe in it/him. (52)

And when it was recited to them they said, "We believe in it/him. Certainly it is the truth from our Lord; truly we were Muslims before it." (53)

These will be given their reward twice because of that in which they have persisted.

They turn back evil with good. From what We have given them, they spend. (54)

When they hear idle chatter, they turn away from it and say, "To us, our deeds and to you, your deeds. Peace be upon you; we do not desire ignorant people." (55)

sūrat al-ḥadīd (57):27

Then We caused Our messengers to follow in their footsteps. We sent Jesus, son of Mary, to follow and We gave him the Gospel. We placed in the hearts of those who followed him compassion and mercy and monasticism which they invented; We did not prescribe it for them except as the seeking of God's acceptance. But they did not observe it correctly. So We gave to those of them who believed their reward but many of them are sinners.

These verses prompt several central questions: How have Muslims understood this apparent divine praise of Christians? What have these verses meant to Muslims in both the classical and modern periods of Islamic history? Do these verses justify the assertions and claims made on their behalf? The most comprehensive answer to such queries lies in a close examination of that body of Islamic literature to which allusion has already been made, Qur'ānic commentary (*tafsīr*). Each generation of Muslims has felt the need and the desire for an ever more profound appreciation of the Qur'ān. To meet such a need and to fulfill such a desire there developed within the Islamic religious sciences the particular study and activity known as *tafsīr al-Qur'ān*. The results of this activity number in the thousands of volumes. Not only is any individual *tafsīr* likely to be a multi-volume work, but the span of Islamic exegetical activity now amounts to over thirteen

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centuries. Nor has the production of commentaries been limited to the “canonical” language of Islam, Arabic. Commentaries (*tafāsīr*) have been written in Persian, Turkish, Urdu – in fact, in virtually every language to which the Islamic missionary call (*daʿwah*) has accommodated itself.¹⁵ The sheer size and linguistic coverage of this religious science clearly indicate its centrality and significance for charting the development of Islamic intellectual history. As Charles Adams, in his survey of the field of Islamic studies, has remarked: “There is probably no richer or more important key to the basic but always evolving significance of the Qurʾān in the Muslim religious consciousness than this tradition of *tafāsīr* writings.”¹⁶

It is precisely the attempt to chart the “evolving significance” of these Qurʾānic references to Christians that this book explores by tracing the interpretation of these verses through a series of Qurʾān commentaries chosen to provide both chronological and sectarian coverage. While the full range of exegetical issues raised by each verse is presented, special attention is paid to the phrases most pertinent to this investigation. A dual query animates this effort: Are these verses, as understood by generations of Muslim exegetes, indeed proof-texts for claims about Muslim religious tolerance? Alternately, are interpretations that find in these texts warrants for Christian salvific assertions justified within the broad scope of Islamic exegetical history? Beneath both concerns lies the fundamental question of whether the Muslim understanding of the term “Christian” is consonant with the self-understanding of those who so define themselves. To return to the categories with which this inquiry began: Does Christian self-def-

- 15 Bibliographic interest in the range of Qurʾānic commentary and translation is increasing. See, for example, Maulana Ghulam Mustafa Qassmi, “Sindhi Translations and Tafsiirs of the Holy Quran,” trans. by Sayid Ghulam Mustafa Shah, *Sind Quarterly* 5 (1977): 33–49; Jin Yijiu, “The Qurʾān in China,” *Contributions to Asian Studies* 17 (1983): 95–101; Hassan A. Maʿayergi, “History of the Works of Qurʾānic Interpretation (*Tafsīr*) in the Kurdish Language,” *Journal: Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs* 7 (1986): 268–74. In a work edited by Christian W. Troll may be found articles on Qurʾān renderings in various languages of the Indian subcontinent, such as Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Gujarati: *Islam in India: Studies and Commentaries* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1982). A recently published volume lists translations of the Qurʾān in sixty-five languages, ranging from Afrikaans to Yoruba: Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, ed., *World Bibliography of Translations of the Meanings of the Holy Qurʾān: Printed Translations 1515–1980* (Istanbul: Research Centre for Islamic History, Art and Culture, 1406/1986).
- 16 Charles J. Adams, “Islamic Religious Tradition,” in Leonard Binder, ed., *The Study of the Middle East: Research and Scholarship in the Humanities and Social Sciences* (New York: John Wiley, 1976), 65. Yet more specifically Jacques Waardenburg counts the Qurʾān and its exegetical literature as the first source of information on Muslim assessments of other religious traditions. See “Types of Judgment in Islam About Other Religions,” in Graciela de la Lama, ed., *Middle East: 30th International Congress of Human Sciences in Asia and North Africa, Mexico City 1976* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1982), 137–38.

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inition match the Muslim understanding of Christians? A useful exercise for the preparation of a response would be to “bracket” all previous conceptions of Christianity, or mentally to erase all prior knowledge of the religious community known as Christians. The reader is then encouraged to approach the information offered by these commentators, as they address the Qurʾānic verses under consideration, as if it were the only available data on this group.¹⁷ The merits of such an approach are commensurate with the degree of clarity and comprehension it provides. Such mental “reservation” serves as an indispensable propaedeutic to any adequate appreciation of the centuries of Islamic scholarship herein discussed. For Muslim exegetes, as for other Muslims, the Qurʾān is God’s own word. It is the ultimate source of truth on all matters, including other religions. Only if this is clearly understood will the testimony of Islamic exegesis be comprehensible, will a faithful understanding of Qurʾānic Christians emerge.

17 Roger Arnaldez followed such an approach in his presentation of the Qurʾānic Jesus: “Nous laisserons se dessiner le portrait du Messie sur un fond purement coranique et islamique et nous parlerons de lui comme d’un prophète de l’Islam, exactement comme si le Coran avait été le premier et le seul livre révélé qui parle de lui.” *Jésus: fils de Marie, prophète de l’Islam* (Paris: Desclée, 1980), 16–17.

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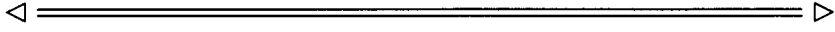
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PART I



Qurʾānic commentary and commentators