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Book Reviews

JOHN O'BRIEN
THE QUR'AN
AND THE CROSS

*A study of al-Nisa (4):157
"and they did not kill him and did not
crucify him, but it was made
to appear so to them."*

(Beiträge zur Missionswissenschaft /Interkul-
turellen Theologie 45), Wien/Zürich:
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für Mission), where it was
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This book is about the one verse in
the Qur'an, which, on the one side,

1. Rev. Dr. Jan Slomp (1932-1922), widely published Islamologist, became a minister of the Dutch Reformed Church in 1962. Appointed in 1964 to Pakistan, he ministered there until 1977 as a specialist in Islam, in the service of the Pakistani church. On his return to the Netherlands, he became involved in Christian-Muslim dialogue throughout Europe, promoting more open attitudes to believers of other religions and the establishment of Dialogue Across Borders. His last email to John O'Brien was written 16/11/22, five weeks before he returned to God.

for many Christians is a major stumbling block to take the message of the Qur'an seriously. For many Muslims, on the other side, this verse is the ultimate evidence for their claim that the people of the book, the Christians, tampered with their own holy texts. Muslim theologians call this tampering *tabrif*.² For centuries this verse has been a source of discord in polemical and apologetic writings on both sides of the religious divide. How does John O'Brien avoid this bone of contention and help his Christian and Muslim readers to take a fresh new look at this one *ayat* (verse) in order to remove mutual misunderstandings, which obscure its message?

John O'Brien (henceforth: O'B.) begins with a plea for good will: "Explicitly sympathetic to the capacity of Muslim faith to help shape an ethically-based just society, this study seeks to honor the Qur'an both as the sacred book of a World Religion as well as a hermeneutically sophisticated text." By his effort he hopes to create a space for mutual appreciation and understanding. O'B spent 32 years in the *Sindh*, the most southern province of Pakistan and learned to love the country, its people, and languages. This became already evident by a previous book in 2015: *Pakistan – The Instrumentalization of Islam*. For O'B, as a believer and a Spiritan priest, the main source of inspiration is

2. See Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, *Tabrif: The Encyclopaedia of Islam* New Edition, Leiden 2000, 511–512.

the declaration *Nostra Aetate* of the Second Vatican Council in 1965. The section on Islam in *Nostra Aetate* begins with the by now famous line: “On the Muslims, too, the Church looks with esteem.” In eight chapters O’B describes the following aspects of the exegesis of this verse. I hope to present a fair and clear summary of a rather complicated subject.

Chapter 1: A Substitute for the Crucified Christ

The chapter begins with an overview of main line Sunni commentators, from Al-Tabari (about AD 923) until Mawdudi (1903–1979). Several of the Sunni interpreters make grammatical objections about the explanation of the Arabic words *shubbihā lahūm*, which O’B. translates in the title “It was made to appear so to them.” O’B understands “It” to refer to the event of the crucifixion and its impact. Yet, it is debated whether the translation should be “he (namely Jesus) appeared so to them.” The translation “he” would allow the explanation of Judas taking Jesus’ place on the cross. Therefore, “It” against “he”, that is the main issue!

The much-used commentary of Al-Baydawi (d. 1286) opts for an impersonal subject of *shubbihā*. His theological objection is that substitution might predicate deceit to God. This is obviously unthinkable. Following Louis Massignon³ O’B mentions the *zindiq* or free-thinker Ibn al-Rawandi, who on the basis of Sura 4:157 questioned the reliability of the Qur’an, because it denies the reality of the crucifixion against all evidence provided by two world religions, Judaism and Christianity. O’B concludes: “Sub-

stitutionism, the most frequently attested Sunni explanation of the crucifixion of Jesus, does not enjoy unanimity” (p. 29). The Swahili translation of the Qur’an, not mentioned by O’B, has an interesting variant of what happened on Golgotha: *Shubbihā lahūm* meaning: “But he was made to appear like a dead man.” According to this translation, Jesus survived, disguised himself and went to Galilee, where he met with his disciples.⁴

Chapter 2: The Crucifixion in Shi’a Tafsir and Isma’ili Ta’wil

O’B shows a difference of opinion between Twelvers and Isma’ili Sixers. The former follow the Sunni majority, because their hidden imam reminds them, typologically, of the disappearance of Jesus on his way to the cross. The Isma’ilis, on the contrary, explain in their own way that Jesus was really crucified. The surprise of this chapter is that the great Sunni theologian Al-Ghazali (d. 1111) sides with this Isma’ili explanation (see on Al-Ghazali also Massignon, p. 533, as quoted by O’B). Shi’ites have less difficulty with a suffering Jesus because of the place martyrs have in their soteriology. Sunnis, on the other side, hold that a great prophet like Jesus cannot become a failure through crucifixion. Only minor prophets can become martyrs (p. 118). It may be interesting to add, that the other great medieval theologian Ibn Taimiyya (1263–1328) deals with Sura 4:157 at several places of his refutation of the Christian faith *Al-Jawab al-Sahih*. Ibn Taimiyya is a great authority for many fundamentalist Muslims today. He thinks

3. *Opera Minora, II*, edited by Y. Moubarac, Liban 1963, 523–536.

4. See Ernst Dammann, *Basileia*. Walter Freytag zum 60. Geburtstag, Stuttgart 1959, pp.245–251.

that a substitution took place perhaps by a jinn but concludes that there is no unanimity among Christians and Muslims on the details of the crucifixion. Ibn Taimiyya and other Muslim commentators assumed, that when the Qur'an elsewhere speaks of the death of Christ, it cannot mean death on the cross. Yet, Ibn Taimiyya firmly believes that all people of the Book, whether Jews or Christians, will be believers in Christ after his second coming. He gives Jesus' death a place in his eschatology.

Chapter 3:
Two fundamentalisms
and a New Polemic

O'B places his argument in the context of British colonialism in India. Despite some efforts to establish courteous relations by Christians like Samuel Crowther, Henry Martyn, Thomas Carlyle and Thomas Patrick Hughes and the Muslim reformer Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817–1898), a collision of new Christian and Muslim fundamentalists could not be avoided. Two men dominated the scene. The Muslim polemicist Khalil al-'Uthmani al-Kairanawi (1818–1891) and his opponent, the leading missionary Karl Gottlieb Pfander (1803–1865). Though German, Pfander served an Anglican mission. Pfander's book *Mizan-al-haqq, Balance of the Truth*, had attracted the attention of the Indian Muslim theologian Al-Kairanawi. In 1854 it came to a debate between these two men.

Al-Kairanawi trumped Pfander by using publications of higher criticism by European biblical scholars fully unknown to him. Al-Kairanawi was moreover the first Muslim apologist to appeal to the so-called *Gospel of Barnabas*, parts of which were quoted in the introduc-

tion of the first English translation of the Qur'an by George Sale (1734). This *Gospel of Barnabas* mentions also how Judas by divine intervention was made a lookalike of Jesus. After the debate Al-Kairanawi replied with his best-seller *Izhar al-haqq, Demonstration of the Truth*. It is being reprinted until recently in Arabic, English and Urdu, while fully exploiting the newly "rediscovered" *Gospel of Barnabas*. O'B. devotes therefore a special chapter to it. Pfander's book is reprinted and still used by some evangelical missions.

Chapter 4:
Pseudo-Barnabas

Annoyed by the ever-returning Muslim appeal to this *Gospel of Barnabas* (GB) a search was made for it resulting in the discovery of an Italian version with 222 chapters in the Imperial library of Vienna, where it is still kept. Decades later an incomplete Spanish text was found as well and published by Luis Bernabé Pons. Laura and Lonsdale Ragg translated this Italian *Gospel of Barnabas* into English. They showed its spurious character in a critical introduction. Of their English text an Arabic translation was made, however without their introduction. It had been replaced by a new one by the Egyptian scholar Rashid Rida, who claimed its authenticity. During the following one hundred years the GB was distributed in the following languages: Besides new editions in modern Italian and modern Spanish, in English, Arabic, Urdu, Persian, Indonesian, Turkish, Swahili, French, German and Dutch. Contrary to O'B, I showed elsewhere that the original GB was written in Spanish, whereas the Italian version was made almost simultaneously for propaganda in Rome. The main concern of O'B however, in this chapter is that the GB strengthens

the opinion held by ever more Muslims, that not Jesus but Judas was crucified in his place. This conjecture was first made by 'Abd al-Jabbar (d. 1025) (p. 94). The fact that the very influential Mawdudi defends the GB aggravates O'B's efforts to find support for an alternative exegesis of Sura 4:157.

Chapter 5: Subaltern Muslim Theology of the Cross

This chapter deals with some alternative Muslim views about God's dealing with humanity and with vulnerable prophets in His service and taking into account the status of oppressed or persecuted Muslims. The many publications of Louis Massignon (1883–1962) about Mansur Al-Hallaj have shown how within Muslim mysticism there can exist sensitivity for the symbolism of the cross (pp. 121,122): "I will die in the religion of the cross", al-Hallaj declared. Despite his condemnation and crucifixion, the quoted words were accepted by many Iranian, Indian and Turkish Hallajians (p. 129). It is found in Punjabi poetry. This deeper meaning of Sura 4:157 got lost "in banal, literalist reading", says O'Brien. This redemptive reading "discloses how divine wisdom willed to overcome human evil not by worldly power, but by converting evil into a higher good". For a Christian this is the most beautiful chapter of this book. But only for a Christian?

Chapter 6: Qur'an 4:157: A Refutation of Jewish Polemics Not of Christian Doctrine

In chapter 6 O'B shows that older Muslim commentators often tend to interpret Sura 4:157 out of context. The underlying ten-

sion between the Prophet and the Jewish tribes in Medina is essential here. Therefore chapter 6 contains the clue for solving the conflict about verse 4:157. The Jews claim to have killed Jesus. Moreover, they have spoken calumny against his mother Mary. Muhammad often identifies with the role of major prophets like Moses and Jesus, his predecessors. In the claim of the Jews in Medina about having killed Jesus he hears a threat against himself. But it is obvious they have not succeeded in killing Jesus and thus finishing his impact. Five hundred years later the presence of so many Christians in countries surrounding Arabia are proof of that. The denial of the Jewish claim that they killed and crucified has to be understood metaphorically, because they failed to eradicate him as a great successful prophet. The denial is a metaphor for their failure. O'B surveys anti-Christian Jewish polemics starting from the NT, in Talmud and folk-literature. In Muhammad's days these polemics were still present among the Jews in Medina. The author also briefly describes the history of the Prophet's dealing with the Jewish tribes in Medina and their final expulsion. History is part of the political context of qur'anic exegesis. I apologize for having this time rather freely summarized O'Brien's contextualization.

Chapter 7: Docetist Exegesis of 4: 157

Docetism was: "In the early Church, a tendency, rather than a formulated and unified doctrine, which considered the humanity and sufferings of the earthly Christ as apparent rather than real. In some forms it held that Christ miraculously escaped the ignominy of death, e.g. by Judas Iscariot or Simon of Cyrene changing places with Him just before the cruci-

fixion.” This quotation from F. L. Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, London, Oxford University Press, second edition 1974, explains where Muslim substitutionism found its arguments and gave it its specific Islamic form. But all churches rejected it as foreign to the biblical text, though it sometimes looms up. O’B shows that it is equally foreign to the text of the Qur’an.

Chapter 8:
Substitutionist Exegesis
of Qur’an 4:157: A semiotic Reading

In a final chapter O’B analyzes the text linguistically. I summarize the conclusion of the author by two quotations:

- (1) “Substitutionism is not a natural explanation, but an arbitrary conjecture and an ideological construction”: “It jettisons the *ghaibiyya* of the text, reducing divine mystery to the magical and the banal.” By using the Arabic theological concept *ghaibiyya* O’B refers to the invisible, transcendental dimension of reality.
- (2) “Substitutionism does scant justice, either to the profundity of the Qur’anic text or to the finesse of the Muslim intellectual tradition” (p. 238).

It goes without saying that the reviewer recommends this thorough study of a complicated issue to Christian and Muslim scholars alike.

Jan Slomp,
with the kind permission
of the German journal
Interkulturelle Theologie.
und Missiologie

WILLY MBUINGA MAYUNDA
LE PÈRE DUPARQUET :
DE LA REPRISE
DE LA PRÉFECTURE
APOSTOLIQUE
DU CONGO À LA
NAISSANCE DE L’ÉGLISE
DE BOMA

LEUVEN-LA-NEUVE, ÉDITIONS ACADEMIA,
2022. 425 PAGES.

This important study of one of the pioneers of 19th century missionary movement in west central and eastern Africa, Charles Duparquet, commands respect and careful reading. It is divided into six unequal parts. The brief introduction, the initial Spiritan mission in Landana, and then Boma, enable Mayunda, in Part Five, to serenade the extraordinary missionary Duparquet and the insight of Francis Libermann. One senses the pleasure and satisfaction the author derives in promoting Boma, his home diocese. The colony-school and seminary set up in Mbata Kiela, the author notes, produced highly reputable Congo leaders such as Joseph Kasa-Vubu (Congo president 1960-1965) and Joseph Albert Malula (first Congo Cardinal Archbishop of Kinshasa, 1964-1989) (p.195).

Mayunda, however, follows some historians (e.g., WRG Randles) to claim that the first experience of evangelization in the Kongo, was a failure (*un échec*, p. 23-24). This controversial position needs to be more closely examined in any new edition of this important book to ensure that one gives full value to the earliest establishment of a flourishing Kongo Church, from 1491, in a non-colonial set-