

Islamic Origins by Professor Peter von Sivers

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Starting from 3:20:

I am really focusing on only one point that I am pursuing in this book on which I'm working, and that is concerned with [tritheism](#) which looms quite large in the in the Quran and in the debates of the 6th and early 7th centuries. So, let's see a quick overview and let me begin now—Professor Mecham briefly alluded to this already—Islamic origins have become very important in the last sort of 50 years, or maybe even shorter than that, because the research that has been carried out on these Islamic origins, quite different from the traditional approach that was taken ever since the 19th century. And the 19th century, of course with the beginning of academic research of Judaism, Christianity, was a period where scholars, usually secular in background, we're looking at the origin of the religions of Judaism, Christianity, and eventually also Islam.

Now, in the case of Islam this has been hampered for quite a bit, because—even that is well known, of course, and also admitted by Muslims themselves—the Islamic sources date, in general, to 200 years after the first appearance of what we then later called Islam. So, that means that these sources are have were written with the delay of a considerable amount of time, which meant then that all kinds of religious points of view, also various kinds of tribal competitions, tribal boosting and the like, were part of this Islamic tradition as it developed 200 years later. And we do not have really a good access to the original documents or the events that we would be looking at through these documents going back 200 years earlier.

So, [Orientalism](#), which is then the field that engaged in the research on Islamic origins, operated then according to the theory of, as I call it here, the onion peel theory; meaning, you peel away layer after layer so that eventually you arrive at the historical kernel. That dominated the field until about 1980, and ended, unfortunately now in retrospect in a disaster, because you peeled and peeled and peeled, and as we know, onions don't have kernels, and so there was nothing once you had taken away all of the peels. That means there was a considerable crisis in Islamic studies which were accompanied also by an enormous amount of [polemics](#); people disputing each other, disputing each other's ability and the like, which has taken place. We are just barely coming out of this. I've been always trying to avoid these kinds of controversy because, of course, they lead to nothing and do not help in the in the actual research. But, it's still going on, particularly in Europe: in Germany, and in France; in England, there are vicious reviews of scholars of each other. So, it's a minefield.

It's a minefield, of course, also because what is happening in the Middle East right now is of course a resurgence of what one can call Islamic reformism. In other words, a form of Islam that was dominant, maybe in the 900s, 1000s, 1100s, but not thereafter. And this kind of reform Islam emphasizes, very strongly, the historicity of the events of 600; even though they are doubtful in in their actual occurrence. So, what scholars who have been now working during the last 50 years on Islamic origins are working with is the assumption of a context in which Muslims appeared in the course of the 600s; and this contextualism approach is the one that I'm also embracing. So, my own project is involved with the sources that were contemporary to the rise of Islam in the 600s, which are mostly Christian in nature. Now, the interesting phenomenon exists also that the Quran itself—so the holy scripture of the Muslims—can be dated, actually, to the 600s. And recent carbon dating of some of these early manuscripts has even revealed the possibility that the Quran might have existed before the Quran; so 580 instead of the 620s, etc.

Now, with that as a background, I would like to begin with—this is not contextualism—the approach that we can understand the rise of Islam only if we really have a good understanding of what happened among/within the Christian denominations of the 500s. We are talking there about vicious attacks of Christians against each other; the 500s weren't maybe quite as bad as see the 400s, but they were still pretty bad. And, you can see this in this particular title that I included by [Philip Jenkins](#)—a lengthy title, but as I

think, a very descriptive one. And I recommend this [book](#) very much to you, so that you have an idea of what *really* went on before Christianity became what it actually was: with lots of assassinations, street riots, people being deposed from their bishoprics, and so on.

So, with that in the background, we need to understand that two councils—[Chalcedon](#) 541 [sic, 451], and the [fifth Ecumenical Council](#) of [Constantinople](#), 553—essentially set Christianity into its path, which then was also important for the 600's when Islam emerged. And we are talking there about, first of all, the [Chalcedonian Creed](#), which then became constituent of the Christian denominations: first of what we call Eastern Christianity, but then also Catholicism, and of course, eventually put Protestantism; and that does not play a major part, certainly not in my talk, and also in historically in the evolution of early Islam. So, I'm not commenting much on this. But, I will be commenting on two Churches that were considered from the point of view of Chalcedon—so, in other words, from the [Byzantine Emperor](#) that determined the Chalcedonian Creed, which, of course, is basic for all Christian Churches that that Creed should be the orthodox one—so, these two Churches departed from it and were described therefore as heresies. Now, as a good historical scholar who does not have any religious acts to grind, for me these are not heresies, these are just other expressions of Christianity.

So, therefore, I'm talking about [Nestorianism](#), *one* of the forms of Christianity that existed at this time. It was driven out of the Byzantine, or Eastern Roman Empire, into the [Persian Empire](#) that was a great competitor during the 500s with the Roman Empire. They were driven out because they allegedly preached [two persons in the one Jesus Christ](#), and how can that be Christianity if you have a full humanity and a full divinity in this one person; I will come back to this particular question. But, that was then the reason why—and there were, of course, political machinations that accompanied this process of driving the Nestorians out—they reconstituted themselves in the Persian Empire, where they formed a Christian minority, because of course, the Persians were of completely different backgrounds: [Zoroastrian](#); which is not of interest for our purpose here.

The other main Christian Church at that time was up-and-coming, and was actually fighting the main Church—the imperially represented Church—mightily with all of the means that Jenkins also discusses here about mutual [calumniation](#)s, and so and so on. This other Church was set off the [Monophysites](#) in Egypt, and they had a special name, as far as Syria was concerned, where they were called the [Jacobites](#). Now, the founding father of the Monophysites, in general, including then also the Jacobites in Syria, was [Severus of Antioch](#); he was a bishop for a short time then he was deposed by the imperial Church. And then he was determined to establish a separate Monophysite Church hierarchy, with the establishment of bishoprics, particularly in Syria; so, I will show you on a map then a little further on where exactly. And then after his death, two people particularly were appointed to see to it that this Church was well-represented in Syria in competition with the Eastern Roman Chalcedonian Church. And so, you have various places in Syria where you have double hierarchies, competing with each other, and, of course, fighting for the believers in the various towns of where they were represented.

So, I'm referring here to Theodore and [Jacob Baradaeus](#) who were appointed as bishops, and who then—and that's now the important point—became active among the Arabs. As they unfolded the activity in the period after their appointment, so 544, so in the 550s, 60s, 70s, when they converted many imperial Chalcedonian Christians to Monophysitism in Syria. They penetrated actually then also into Arabia, and quite a few then became Monophysites *rather* than Chalcedonian Christians; so they converted from Chalcedonian Christianity to Monophysitism, to Jacobism. A very important point here, because we're not talking about any Arab Pagans.

Now, however, as this process of the formation of the Monophysitic Church in Syria took place, there was a split within the quote, heresy, of the Monophysites or Jacobites, that was the heresy of [John Philoponus](#) who formulated this tritheist quote, heresy. Now, here I have to be a little technical so I hope you can all follow

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me with the with the thought process that defines now this tritheism for which John Philoponus was important.

John is actually much better known as a great philosopher in the [Alexandrian tradition](#). We know a lot about his criticism about Aristotle, and so he played a major part then later in the Middle Ages. But, he was also again an important theologian, and he developed the following basic definition of Trinity which contradicts that of Chalcedon, and that is, of course, there is God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Spirit that proceeds either: from the Father and the Son, or from the Father alone; [that's](#), of course, a [further division](#), then, within Christianity.

So, this idea here of Father, Son, and Spirit, all representing manifestations, or individuality so to speak, of the divinity was rejected by Philoponus. And he, instead, proposed that each of the Trinity is its own God. So, there's God the Father, Jesus the Son—but he is a God by himself—and then the Spirit, whom John calls a comforter that is another—not exactly person, but certainly another entity, so to speak. Why was that possible, that such a redefinition of Trinity that contradicts actually the [Nicene Creed](#), which I briefly implied a few moments ago, why was it possibly that that John did so? And that is by Philoponus' time, so we are talking about the second half of the 500s, the Aristotelian philosophy in which John was steeped very deeply, is quite ambiguous as to what a [substance](#) is. And so, Aristotle actually says [substance](#) is really a primary substance.

So, every one of us who's sitting here is a substance to herself or himself, and therefore then, the nature—today we would say the character or the character traits—are personal to each of us or to each of the substance says that we represent. That is certainly possible in an Aristotelian interpretation, but it would mean that what unites us—so all of us can be considered members or individuals of humanity—so we represent, each individually, what we can call the secondary substance of humanity. So, in other words, humanness is what is represented in all of us. But, there is in a contradiction in Aristotle: we could be interpreted either as being each of us a substance with our personal characteristics and traits which we would then call nature; or we could say we are own members of humanity and are individuations of this humanity, but as individuations we are not persons, we then still need in addition to be called whatever our names are with our personal characteristics and the like. So, this double definition of what nature is plagues the entire 500s, and is actually, in terms of theological thought, the background for all of these quarrels and differences among the Christians.

In any event, the point that Philoponus made was: in Trinity, each of the three figures represents their own substance, and so therefore, what unites them is really only in name. So, in other words, yes, there's God the Father, there's Jesus as Son, and there is a Spirit, and then, sort of an in an abstract sense, they have the common nature of quote, divinity, but divinity doesn't really exist; it's only a figment of our imagination—that Aristotle says actually, quite explicitly, in [De Anima](#). So therefore, they're only sort of vaguely in one's mind, but not in reality united through the term Trinity; but, they are really all apart from each other. That now was the heresy of tritheism that became rampant in Syria.

And I mentioned here on the bottom—this is just in passing that I want to mention this—the monks in Syria were now deeply split, so the Jacobite Monophysites were deeply split between *regular* Monophysitism, which was one of the so-called heresies and which relies on actually on the particular definition of what the nature of Jesus is—I will not go into this, it is not necessary for our purposes here. And then, there are lots of monks in the same monasteries, because monasteries dotted the landscape of Syria, who professed this tritheism. So, because of this split, and probably there were furious discussions among these monks, are the members of Trinity substances, or are the members of Trinity just manifestations or aspects, so to speak? Furious discussions, we can assume, in these in these monasteries.

And so, the [Archimandrites](#)—as the documents referred to, they were actually the abbot's of these monasteries—were very concerned about these splits among their monks in these monasteries. And they wrote to their respective bishops: “Help us. What can we do in all of this, and we unfortunately don't know the answer?” But that force must have been a situation of high anxiety toward the end of the 700s. And so,

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given this particular situation, there was on top of that also then a [schism](#) in the Jacobite or Monophysite Church hierarchy with one of the bishops, [Damian of Alexandria](#), who was accused by his opponent, [Peter of Callinicum](#). Callinicum, by the way, was at that time the name for [Raqqa](#), that of course is the Eastern Syrian city that was recently reconquered from Isis. If you want to locate this geographically, I would show you a map in a moment. So, they accused each other, these two bishops, of horrible heresies: [Sabellianism](#), which is a much earlier heresy in the late 200s, early 300s, according to which Jesus was not divine but merely an adopted figure of high spiritual standing. So, he was accused of that particular heresy and then the important point, Peter of Callinicum was accused of tritheism; the fact is he was not a tritheist, but that's not important. Tritheism continued right into the early 600s, when finally the schism was ended and tritheism then probably faded from the scene; but not quite, and that's the whole point of my departure then for Islamic origins.

One more point, briefly, because this conflict between regular Jacobites, or the Monophysite so-called heresy, and then the split within the Jacobites represented by these tritheists, that then was visible among the Arabs who were under a vice-regent, a so-called [Phylarch](#). These were commanders in the name of Byzantium or Eastern Rome, responsible for the defenses of the borders of the Roman Empire against the Persians. And the desert border was, therefore then, the border where the nomadic Arabs were enrolled as allies of the Byzantines in order to help protect it, and they were called the [Ghassanids](#); and you have the spelling here.

The Ghassanid Phylarch, who was the leader of the western Arabs, one of them this, Jafnah al-Ghassan [sic¹] actually tried to end this schism among these bishops so that this whole tritheist episode would somehow be put aside, or overcome, so that regular Monophysitism would return to the land. However, Jafnah was no longer very powerful, and so he failed then in his efforts to reconcile. And this schism continued, because by now power really had passed to other Arabs, whom I describe as eastern Arabs.

And so, let's go on. Let me quickly now show you on the map where what we are talking about. Here is the center of the province of Arabia, that was where these Ghassanids resided, but they governed actually this entire area which we can call the Syrian steppe and desert. Let me show you now in the following map how far this Ghassanid territory extended—you can see a quite a bit into the direction of Baghdad and Mesopotamia. And here now, we will see the Ghassanid kingdom that was deputy to defend the eastern border of Rome, against now eastern Arabs who were deputed by the Persian king, or king of kings—[shahanshah](#)—for the defense of Persia against Rome; and they were the [Lakhmids](#), whom you see here as the adjacent territory. So, in the 500s the Romans and the Persians had already gone to war against each other several times. Generally, the Romans were victorious but usually the Persians were able to come back. And, of course, they used their vice-regents, those of the Ghassanids and of the Lakhmids, as allies to fight the war for them in in the desert, here in the in the southern part of Syria. So, here, roughly here.

And so, now a few words about the Lakhmids. The Lakhmids, now, were part of the eastern Arabs. Their quote, [king](#), the equivalent of Phylarch among the Ghassanids, converted in 594 to Nestorian Christianity. Now, Nestorian Christianity is a Christian Church, I mentioned this already briefly, that believes in the two equal natures of Jesus. So Jesus was equally human, so he was fully human. But, he was also, of course God, because God in the interpretation of the theology of the 500s was also Jesus, in the sense that in terms of Trinity and how it was represented, he represented God coming to Earth in order to bring salvation to humans. By contrast, the Monophysites believed in a primarily divine Jesus who took on the flesh of humans when he came to Earth, but was let's say 3/4s divine, 1/4 human. So, we can see here that was a real contrast over which you could go to war and could kill each other, if it came really to blows. And then on top of that, you had the schism within this schism that there was somebody stood up and said, 'well when we

¹ [al-Mundhir III](#) is listed as the Phylarch at this time [569-581], and was noted as the one as the one who tried to broker a reconciliation in 580, and who had to battle the Lakhmids: John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History*, [IV.39](#). Jafnah is listed as the founder of the Ghassanid dynasty in 220.

talk about Trinity we have to talk about three different gods,' so you can see the enormous amount of conflict that existed in Christianity.

Now, he converted to Nestorianism, and then one of the sources says [TBD, if you know it, please let me know] once he had converted, he chased the Jacobites from the provinces. So, in other words, only Nestorians now remained in the east among the eastern Arabs. All the Jacobites, all the Monophysites, now were pushed back into Ghassanid territory, or even further south into Egypt. And now, the eastern Arabs had established *their* form of Christianity as dominant in the eastern steppe.

Now, unfortunately however, as it so happened with the Ghassanids, but there it had happened already in 580, both the Roman Emperor and now also the Persian king in the early 600s, decided that these vice-regents in the desert, who were the commanders of the Arabs, to fight this supplementary [war](#), so to speak, between the Romans and the Persians; that they were expendable. They had, maybe, grown a little too strong for their appointed positions. And so I mentioned already, the Ghassanids had been reduced around 580, now the [Persian king](#) went a step further: he had his king, who was supposed to defend the border against the Romans, assassinated outright; and so, that was the end of the eastern Arabs in the city of [Hira](#), which is on western fringes of the Persian Empire. And, as I'm saying here now in the next outline—well now in a moment—the now leaderless, the eastern Christians, eastern Arabs, dispersed into the desert, but they became then powerful. So, that's the dynamic, so to speak, of eastern versus western Arabs right around 602; and that's an important point of departure into which we'll go then in a moment.

As it so happened, however, just a few months after the Persian shah had decided to murder his vice-regent in the desert, a usurper in Constantinople overthrew the [Roman Emperor](#). And [Phocas](#), the usurper emperor, then was a usurper against whom the shananshah, Khosrow II of the Persians, went to war because he wanted to avenge the overthrow of the previous emperor for the reason that he, Khosrow, had been helped already a few years earlier by the Roman emperor to regain his throne; there was a brief revolt in Persia. The Romans and the Persians always had hostility against each other, but there were also periods of peace, and so they intermarried and so on. And so, it was not surprising that Khosrow declared himself now the avenger of the murdered Roman emperor and went to war against the usurper. Of course, now he lacked a representative in the desert because just a few months earlier the eastern Arabs had, after the murder of their king, had dispersed into the desert. And so, there was not much that he could do now as far as the desert zone, in in terms of the war of the Persians against the Romans was concerned.

Now, the war—well-known, no need now to go into the details—moved back and forth: at one point the Persians conquered almost all of the Roman Empire, they went as far as Egypt, but then the war turned around, miraculously, under a new emperor, [Heraclius](#), who then turned the tables and turned the entire situation around and eventually in 628 actually even advanced against the [capital](#) of the Persians. So, that was the end then of Khosrow, and the end also of the Persian Empire because there was no clear successor. In that particular situation now, because the Arabs were among themselves in a way throughout this war period, 602 to 628, because on neither side were they needed or wanted. There were among themselves, so that's the important consideration, that we have to think of now with the idea that the eastern Arabs were a bit stronger than the western Arabs, but both were now in the Syrian desert; and watch from afar how the biggies were killing each other so to speak, the two empires.

And then in 622, right when the [war](#) was beginning to turn in favor of the of the eastern Romans, they [declared an Arab kingdom](#); 622. This is very important that this Arab kingdom was declared at that particular time, because actually, from the Islamic tradition so that the sources that are dated 200 years after the emergence of the early Muslims, 622 is which date? The date of the [hijra](#), the immigration of Mohammad from Mecca to Medina, and in Medina then the organization of the early Islamic community according to the Islamic tradition. Well now in the Christian sources of the period, 622 is the date of the declaration of the Arab kingdom. And, accordingly then, those Christian chroniclers of the period always then talked about what then happened with this Arab Kingdom.

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So, let's get then to this dark moment, so to speak, in the Syrian desert. We know that eastern Arabs dispersed, made themselves dominant, so probably the western Arabs were subservient, or at least they were being battled against, or maybe there were conflicts, or maybe there was also gradually emerging of the two; we don't know, so it would be pure speculation. And as a good historian I'm not doing that particular thing, I merely for purposes of illustration I want to show you, yes, there is a connection here between the Islamic sources of 200 years later, and what the Christian chroniclers of the 600s say, only it's being described a little differently. Instead of a hijira of a prophet by the name of Mohammed migrating from Mecca to Medina, we are talking about an Arab Kingdom emerging, and right from the start this Arab Kingdom, according to one Christian chronicler, consisted of two leaders and two sides. And this is perhaps the most important source here for the understanding of the beginning of Islam, because we are talking about probably western Christianized Arabs forming one side, eastern Christian Arabs forming another side, and each had a leader. That corresponds to when Mohammad was in Medina with his efforts, of Mohammad's, to return to Mecca, and to convert Mecca from polytheism to monotheism. And of course, the Meccans resisted and eventually their resistance was worn down.

Two sides and two leaders, because of course when Mohammad was in Medina there was a leader of these so-called pagan Arabs in Mecca, [Abu Sufyan](#), who represented the other side. So, if this is indeed true, then the Quran is actually very helpful. I mentioned little earlier we now know that the Quran dates truly to the 600s; in which way it came about, that's very mysterious. From what I am saying here, we have to assume that it came together as a scripture between 602 and sometime towards the end of the 600s. And when I say 602, that's of course the time when the eastern Christian Arabs dispersed in the Syrian desert. Note by the way, that I'm not saying anything about Mecca and Medina. I'm merely talking about the eastern and western Arab Christians in the Syrian desert, wherever they were.

Now, that gets us sent to the Quran which is a reliable source now for our further investigation. There is a curious term, [mushrikun](#), that appears about 19 times in the Quran, and is usually translated as pagans and polytheists. But in 1999, [Gerald Hawting](#) published a very important [book](#)—Hawting is also among those who contextualize and seek to understand the beginnings of Islam in the wider context—and he determined that these mushrikun were actually Christians. But that's where the book ends, and we have to go much farther than those Christians. And so, therefore, I wanted to include here now a few verses that give us an idea here how much further we can go:

“Indeed, those who have believed, and those who were Jews and [Sabaeans](#) and the Christians (nasara) and the [Magians](#) and those who associate (ashraku) these are the mushrikun –Allah will judge between them on the Day of Resurrection. Indeed, Allah is over all things.” [Q 22:17](#)

Now, there was [a Nestorian metropolitan](#) who lived a bit later, and who can be related to that particular Quranic verse, because in his writing which is accessible through the composition [Majālis](#), he says the following:

“As for the monotheists to whose monotheism the Quran testifies, whom we recognize to be confessing that God is one, they are as we ourselves [that is the Nestorians, the Jacobites and the [Melkites](#); the Melkites are the Chalcedonians, and that is a particular term that was being used at that time for the imperial Christians, meaning those under the king; so] and those of the Christians who follow our way. As for the polytheists, (mushrikun) among them, they are the people who imitate Christianity, like the [Marcionites](#), the [Daysanites](#), the [Manicheans](#), and the Tritheists (there you also have the Arabic term) those who posit three, and others who trace their origins to Christianity, but who are devoid of Christianity and far removed from it.”

So, in other words, the Tritheists are Christian heresy from the point of view of the Nestorians, and there are other Christians who are pretending to be Christians, but they are not truly Jacobite, Melkite, or Nestorian. Now, just so that you know when [Shinaya](#) uses say the term Tritheist, al-trithuniyyah, he means that and not

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the term that, already in the fifth century was available among Arabs in Arabic. The term Trinity, [thaluth](#) that would be the Arabic, that term is *not* being used; and so, therefore, this testimony by Shinaya is so important.

So, let me now show you what then the Quran has to say about these Tritheists:

“O People of the Scripture, do not commit excess in your religion or say about Allah except the truth. The Messiah Jesus, the Son of Mary, was but a Messenger of Allah and His Word which He directed to Mary and a soul (created at a command) [So, it’s the Immaculate Conception of course of Jesus] from Him. So believe in Allah and his messengers. And do not say “Three”; desist- it is better for you.” [Q 4:171](#)

Another verse:

“They have certainly disbelieved who say, ‘Allah is the third of three.’ [Q 5:73](#)

So, neither of these verses speaks of Trinity, but just of three. Therefore then, and here I’m saying that the term Trinity does not appear. So, we can’t assume, coming now to the conclusion, that what the Quran says in its own testimony about these Tritheists—who emerged in the 500s and caused this split among the Jacobites or the Monophysites, that was a particular predominant form of Christianity among the western Arabs; whether they were the majority, or whether Monophysites in general—so, those that did not split from the run-of-the-mill Monophysitism that Severus had created, but belonged to the smaller and more specific Tritheist sect, we do not know. Probably the assumption would be that the majority were Monophysites of the western Arabs. But there was a minority, and these were clearly the ones against which the Quran polemicizes. And that’s very important, because the Quran is actually very friendly towards both Jacobism, Monophysitism, *and* Nestorianism; and in fact, in many ways, comes out of Nestorianism. So, it denies—that is very expressed—in the Quran that Jesus is the Son of God. Instead, he’s always the servant or like all other prophets of God.

As I tried to emphasize throughout my presentation, first of all, these mushrikun were not pagans, they were Christians. They were either western Jacobite or eastern Nestorian, and they are generally being treated very gently in the Quran because of these verses of convergence. So, in other words, we hear in the Quran always want to emphasize what we have common with mainstream Christianity; be it Monophysite or Nestorian. Yes there then also verses of divergence, particularly those that emphasize the servanthship of Jesus. But then for the rest of Quran, and if you read it very carefully, you come you come across Mary’s Immaculate Conception [[Q 3.45](#)]; so Mary conceived Jesus through the Spirit, through their Word of God, also the Spirit. This is a variation that is a little more complicated but can also be explained. So, mainstream Christianity that’s how all Christians interpreted the Gospels, that even though Joseph was the father, the conception of Jesus was actually through the Word of God. Jesus has miracle powers, that’s emphasized throughout all the verses that appear in the Quran about Jesus. [[Q 2.253](#), [5.110](#)] And Jesus, if you read carefully, also dies on the cross [[Q 4.157](#)] and is resurrected [[Q 3.55](#)]; even though those verses just intimated, I mean you cannot really interpret it but, and clearly, some work has taken place there to take that away from Jesus. But the Ascension is directly expressed [[Q 19.33](#), also 3.55, again]: Jesus rose to the right of the Heavenly Father. So, one of my conclusions—and this particular attitude that the Quran has to what Christianity as a whole, as opposed to Tritheists who are the *real* bad guys so to speak of the Quran—the ones who talk about the three gods of Trinity, regular, either Monophysite or Melkite or Nestorian Christianity, is being treated in a very friendly way; but always with a view that Jesus was actually the one who announced someone who would come after him.

If you go to John, there are these [famous verses](#) of the [Paraclete](#), which in the Quran, then later in the Islamic tradition, are being interpreted as yes there Jesus announced someone who would come thereafter and that is Muhammad. Mohammad is actually not really a name. It literally means “the praised one,” and is probably, therefore, then the notation, so to speak, for that particular sage, scribe, or other person who worked on the various parts that eventually came together and made up the Quran—the Holy Scripture of

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the Muslims—participating in a collective scholarly reworking, so to speak, of all Christian traditions in order to come up with this notion that Mohammad is really the last prophet, and not Jesus.

With that, I thank you for listening to me and I will be happy also to engage you in discussion.

Q&A:

Q (simplified): The Quran says that Jesus was conceived by the Word, so how do they explain that God is not the father of Jesus; who is the father of Jesus for them?

A: For understanding Christianity, Judaism for that matter as well and Islam, you have to be aware that one of the cardinal points of all of the debates that were often of course quite bloody, as I mentioned, of all of the debates it was always very important that God, the Father, let's put the parentheses for a moment, is transcendent. Transcendence means you can say nothing about him, he is simply removed from anything sensory so even though he reveals himself there's nothing you can say about him, and that has to be protected. So theologians always had to be very careful when they argued that God had a son, in Trinity, because how is that possible that this son, now who is God, comes to Earth and has this double nature, so to speak? Because doesn't that drag the transcendent God into [immanence](#) and make him dirty, so to speak; I mean make him part of this corrupt world, because that was of course always the assumption behind this? This effort to protect the transcendence of God, sort of resurfaced in the formation of Islam, and so therefore then, the strict denial that God can engender sons. But also now, and when you look at the vocabulary, [Walid](#) means a carnal son. Even it's much more abstract, that word which means son of course in Arabic, Walid means child, that could mean that, well, it might be even compatible with this servant function. So, in other words, the concern to protect the transcendence of God, on one hand, but also to fully explain Jesus Christ—after all in the Gospels he comes across as a person with one nature, one character, one number of traits that you can describe very well. You can preach, of course, every Sunday on various aspects of the life of Jesus that he nevertheless was divine. Well, that was precisely then the problem where everybody diverged. Did I come anywhere close to you with my answer?

Q: What would you say is the best way to teach Islam in a way that wouldn't offend or scare off Christians or make them feel threatened about the religion if that makes sense?

A: Or the other way around: how can you sit down with a fundamentalist, or reformist, Muslim and explain Christianity to it to this person? I'm very grateful that you raised this point, because you can of course ask yourself, okay now you have heard a more-or-less learned presentation here about the conflicts among the Christians since the 500s, what's the relevance of all of this, what do you take away from that? Apart from this being, just, I hope solid scholarship. There is a point, and that is remember I mentioned this idea here of convergence? So, in other words, if you know about these Christian roots that Islam has—Islam did not emerge [sui generis](#) out of the revelations that Mohammed received on a mountain near Mecca, which, incidentally, is called [Hira](#). So, there is a remembrance of this particular term, because that's of course the name of the eastern Arab Christian city of Hirah in Mesopotamia.

Anyway, it's of immediate relevance, because if you emphasize to Muslims—look, if you are willing, I will lead you to an understanding of the Quran; but forget for a moment the tradition that was formulated 200 years later; okay? We know about Mohammad, for example, only because a biography was written 200 years later. The word Mohammad appears only three times, as such as Mohammad, in in the Quran. So, we do not even know who revealed the Quran. For all we know is that of what we talk about as the revelation of the Quran was the communal work of scribes who were deeply steeped in all of the scriptures of

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Christianity, including all the non-canonical ones of previous centuries, and put together what we can maybe call a concordance of all of the Christian writings; this is the original meaning of Islam, by the way.

So the whole point here is, if it is possible to— So, let me first answer the question of you and me sitting down with a [Salafi](#), or even jihadi Muslim—I mean jihadi just before he engages in jihad, obviously— Muslim and you can somehow sit down and be patient with each other, then you and I would say: look now, there are Christian roots and these roots, furthermore, appear in the Quran in mostly convergent form, so that there is actually a lot of commonality between Christianity and Islam. And if you are willing, then we count you Muslims among those who inherited the common concordance, heritage of Judaism and Christianity; even though Christianity within itself was, of course, deeply conflicted, as I pointed out. So, we are heirs of all three things, and so the Muslim—the Islamic Quranic revelation—is therefore just another version of the revelatory tradition that comes out of the Middle East.

Now, let's turn it also around of course, since you originally asked the question from the other side, and that is how can how can we— Could you reformulate it so that I can be precise with my with my answer?

Q: How could we help Christians see the humanity in Islam, without threatening their own sense of identity and Christianity?

A: So, that would be then, we among ourselves with— Is any Muslim present? I looked around earlier and didn't think was one. But, I mean obviously, I'm not saying anything offensive, but I merely want to be very sensitive in my answer. And that is, we among ourselves, should draw away from the multiple prejudices that we have about Islam. And they, of course, countless— I'm not even mentioning now the ones that populated the Middle Ages. I'm talking only about let's say, contemporary ones, and among these prejudices are: number one, these orientalists who peel these onion peels away, think that Islam and the rise of Islam has to be explained primarily out of these Islamic sources. But, that has run its course now. We cannot use the Islamic tradition anymore.

Let me give you the example: the Mohammed biography, the so-called *sīra*, was composed, the final version, in 823; so you see the two hundred years that I was talking about. That is for the first time the source where we then learn about Mohammad was born in 570, he grew up in Mecca, he has his first revelations in 610, and so on and so forth. Among ourselves, if we open ourselves to what the Christians had to say about the rise of Islam in the 600s, like I did here in my presentation, then we would come to the conclusion: the origins of Islam can be nicely compared to what Christianity was all about in the 500s, and all of the problems that it experienced; you see them continued here in the origins of Islam.

This will open us up to a view of late antiquity that is much larger than just these few years of the early 600s, when between 610 where the first revelations came, and 632 when the Prophet Muhammad, according to Islamic tradition, died, which is a very narrow focus on the origins of Islam. So, of course, you can retell the story of Muhammad a thousand times—and I do this actually in my history survey classes. But then, of course, a week later I say: Okay, what you have just now learned is not history, but religion. The religious interpretation of how Muslims viewed the rise of Islam. Now, let me tell you what the Christians had to say, when these origins of Islam occurred. So, in short, if you give up this orientalist approach, this notion that through philology you can clarify these Islamic sources and through all of these traditions that are biased and have certain religious points of views, you can come to some sort of historical background or origin. It won't work.

What will work, however, is a historical context that you established, where you have then a much better knowledge certainly of Christianity in late antiquity, and particularly, this curious people called tritheists who usually—by the way, Orientalists dismissed them as just minor people who were discussing a refinement of theological approaches to the problems of Christology and theology. These were, first of all, these were doctrines over which people killed each other, number one, as [Jake?] had said. But then, furthermore, this was a real widespread—among monks of Syria, where Islam probably originated—among

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monks of Syria where lots of monks were tritheists, and where probably lots of Arabs were tritheists; otherwise, why would there be this battle against the mushrikun who were the alleged [associators?].

So, in short, what I'm saying is taking the traditional orientalist approach, talking now only among ourselves not Muslims; although Muslims, in a way, should listen in, so to speak. As people who take in what happened among Christians in the 500s, we are taking this much *wider* contextual approach of: well, that's what happened in Christianity, and that had such and such effects on the Arabs who were in this border region between the two empires, and who were exposed already to the full blast of all of these different Christianities, and who worked out this conflict among themselves, you see.

That's the important point, because of course, the *big* Christian Church then subsequently—I assume we all know this of course—there is still today the [Coptic Church of Egypt](#) that is Monophysitic. The Monophysite Christians in Egypt are *very* defensive against Catholicism against Greek orthodoxy. Greek orthodoxy, Catholicism, Protestantism, and then further 19th century developments in proving that also Mormonism, they all follow this Chalcedonian tradition, about which I didn't say much, And then there are the Nestorians, who are the neglected Christians, they are actually the Christians who then, when eventually the Muslims destroyed the Persian Empire were represented all along the so-called Silk Road. So Christians today in China are very likely to be Nestorians. So the Nestorian community is very small, it has suffered *tremendously* under the ISIS takeover of parts of Iraq, because the representatives of ISIS were very anti-Christian, and the predominant number of Christians in Iraq are the Nestorians, or the descendants of the Nestorians; the so-called [Eastern Church](#).

So, what I'm saying here, is the larger perspective that I'm recommending gives us has much better understanding of what Islam is all about. Thank you very much.