

CHAPTER 9



Approaching the Death on the Cross: A Case Study for Comparative Theology

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The challenge of the cross is one of the most obvious problems for Muslim-Christian dialogue. Whereas the death on the cross is the cornerstone of Christian faith and theology, the Qur'ān seems to pretend that the death on the cross never happened. A common argument for this line of interpretation is the idea that God protects the prophets in the qur'ānic worldview from any harm. Hence Jesus was not killed and not crucified but protected by God. Moreover the Christian claim that the cross shows how much God feels our pain and sorrow is usually criticized because many scholars think that the Qur'ān is against the idea of a suffering God because it highlights God's transcendence and sovereignty). In addition, the Qur'ān seems to argue against any need for salvation in humanity. Thus, the cross seems to be not only ahistorical but also needless and superfluous. It is clear that we cannot solve all these problems in this short essay. But I will at least try to address all of them briefly and to deal with the historicity of the cross in some length.

The Controversy over the Cross

Usually those verses of the Qurʾān that are crucial for the answer to the question of Jesus' crucifixion are understood as denying the historical fact of Jesus' death on the cross. From a Christian perspective, if one considers this interpretation to be definite, it becomes nearly impossible to acknowledge the Qurʾān as the possible Word of God and to appreciate its Christology. For Christians, their belief in redemption is based on the cross, and the crucifixion of Jesus is a hardly deniable historical fact, even if it posed difficulties for Christianity for centuries.

Conversely, from the popular Islamic studies' point of view, the Qurʾān does not comment on the Christian belief in redemption and the related theology of the cross. Therefore, it could be questioned if the Qurʾān really criticizes the aforementioned notions of Christology.¹ The dismissal of a Christian soteriology, however, would be implicitly stated, if one understood 4:157–58 as a rejection of the possibility of a historical crucifixion. We therefore should consider the meaning of the Qurʾānic verses 4:157–58. According to the translation of Muhammad Asad, they read,

“Behold, we [the Jews, A/N] have slain the Christ Jesus,
son of Mary, [who claimed to be] an apostle of God!”
However, they did not slay him, and
neither did they crucify him, but it only
seemed to them [as if it had been] so,
and, verily, those who hold conflicting
views thereon are indeed confused, having
no real knowledge thereof, and following
mere conjecture. For, of a certainty, they
did not slay him: nay, God exalted
him unto himself.

1. According to Martin Bauschke, *Jesus—Stein des Anstoßes. Die Christologie des Korans und die deutschsprachige Theologie* [Jesus—Bone of Contention: The Christology of the Qurʾān and the German-speaking Theology] (Köln u.a.: Böhlau Verlag, 2000), 162n170, the Qurʾān does not know the idea of a soteriological significance of the cross “which is probably due to the fact that Muhammad did not know Paul and his theology of the cross” (my translation). Bauschke's wording is problematic for two reasons: first, it indicates that the Qurʾān could be limited by the limitation of Muhammad's knowledge, which, from an Islamic perspective, can by no means be accepted. Second, in light of some passages of the Qurʾān (e.g., 17:15), I would question Bauschke's claim. However, I suggest leaving the investigation of this question to a later, more thorough study.

In Islamic tradition, these verses are usually interpreted by applying the theory of substitution. The passage that is rendered “but it only seemed to them [as if it had been] so” by Asad is then conceived as “he (another one) was made resembling him (Jesus).” The problem with this translation, however, is that in the Arabic text, the plural appears, and it thus reads *šubbiha lahum*, not *šubbiha lahu*, and no other person is mentioned in the text.² Moreover, the translation causes theological problems: it implies that God kills an innocent human being instead of Jesus. Islamic tradition assumes that either Judas was chosen by God to substitute for Jesus or another disciple volunteered for that purpose.³ However, the idea of a volunteer or even a criminal dying instead of Jesus remains shocking since this idea implies that through God’s intervention somebody not only would have been punished for something he had not done but also killed. This seems especially shocking in light of Jesus’ trial. Since during the trial he insisted on being the Messiah and thus caused Roman jurisdiction to sentence him to death, Jesus himself would have to face his sentence. The idea of God sacrificing somebody else seems questionable. Without God’s intervention, however, a substitution of that kind could not have remained unrecognized. The women beneath the cross, Mary above all, would certainly have noticed this substitution if God had not confused them. Rāzī, quite rightly, questions why God should have confused the women beneath the cross and thus concealed the substitution from them.⁴ Even if one assumed that God actually wanted to show that His prophets are under His protection and that therefore he saved Jesus from the crucifixion, it would remain implausible why He would reveal that only 600 years after this event and why He would leave the poor Christians alone with this disastrous and traumatic experience for centuries. Moreover, from a merciful God one would not expect that He maliciously confuse a mother into believing her son was sentenced to death, although he is actually rescued by God. Finally, there are some passages of the Qurʾān taking it for granted that Jesus has died, as we will see later, and thus

2. Bauschke, *Jesus—Stein des Anstoßes*, 164.

3. Bauschke, *Jesus—Stein des Anstoßes*, 165–66.

4. Bauschke, *Jesus—Stein des Anstoßes*, 168.

contradict the belief that another person was killed instead of Jesus. Therefore, the theory of substitution theologically makes no sense, and even philologically it is contestable.⁵

Discarding the theory of substitution on these grounds, the theory of Docetism can be offered as an alternative. This theory is favored especially by the Ismaelites and interpreters of the Qurʾān influenced by Gnosticism. However, it has only found few supporters among classical Muslim commentators. The theory assumes that through God's intervention only Jesus' human exterior would have been crucified and killed, "but his divine being would have remained untouchable."⁶ With a similar impetus, Claus Schedl emphasizes that the Jews were able to crucify the body of the Messiah; however, they were not able to kill the Spirit-Messiah because he was rescued by God and exalted unto Him.⁷ What speaks against those interpretations is the potential dualism and the body hostility expressed in them. Mahmoud Ayoub therefore emphasizes that Islam does not accept any form of Docetism.⁸

Another classical theory within Islamic theology that tries to explain Q 4:157 is the phantom theory. It originates from Ibn Arabi and assumes that "neither Jesus nor a substitute was crucified, but a phantom created by God for especially this purpose."⁹ This theory can be objected on similar grounds as the theory of substitution. Especially the question why God would not clarify such confusion earlier remains unresolved.

5. These theories' prominence in the Islamic tradition of commentary could be rooted in the fact that such theories of substitution have also been very prominent in early Christian heresies, which might have had an influence in the Muslim tradition of commentary in turn. "Ireneus claims that, according to Basilides (d. 160), not Jesus but Simon of Cyrene . . . had been crucified instead of him" (Bauschke, *Jesus—Stein des Anstoßes*, 175, my translation); Josef Imbach, *Wem gehört Jesus? Seine Bedeutung für Juden, Christen und Moslems* [Who Is in the Possession of Jesus? His Meaning for Jews, Christians, and Muslims] (München: Kösel, 1989), 97.

6. Bauschke, *Jesus—Stein des Anstoßes*, 170.

7. The delusion of the Jews rather consisted in the fact "that they did not recognize the man Jesus as Messiah having come already. They could indeed kill the body of the Messiah, i.e. crucify the man Jesus, the spirit-Messiah, however, the nails could reach no more, since, Allah was exalting him unto himself (sura 3,55)," in Imbach, *Wem gehört Jesus?*, 98, quoting Claus Schedl, *Muhammad und Jesus. Die christologisch relevanten Texte des Koran* [Muhammad and Jesus: The Christologically Relevant Texts of the Qurʾān] (Freiburg-Basel-Wien: Herder, 1978), 469–70.

8. Mahmoud Ayoub, *A Muslim View of Christianity: Essays on Dialogue by Mahmoud Ayoub*, ed. I. A. Omar (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2007), 160: "Islam, however, does not admit of docetism in any form."

9. Bauschke, *Jesus—Stein des Anstoßes*, 171, my translation.

All theories discussed above agree on the presupposition that Jesus did not die on the cross. But if we take a closer look at the Qurʾān we will find some evidence for an interpretation that accepts that Jesus died on the cross.¹⁰ First of all, there are several verses in the Qurʾān that state the fact of Jesus' death. For instance, already in the cradle, the qurʾānic Jesus says about himself, "Hence, peace was upon me on the day when I was born, and [will be upon me] on the day of my death, and on the day when I shall be raised to life [again]!" (19:33). This passage therefore suggests that Jesus expects his own death. Q 5:117 even talks of the death of Jesus in the past tense. Hence it is difficult to deny the real death of Jesus from the Qurʾān. Still, this is discussed in inner-Islamic debates, especially due to the traditional belief in the second coming of Jesus.

Another qurʾānic argument for the death of Jesus is the fact that the Qurʾān states for the martyrs of the battle of Uhud that they are not dead (Q 3:169). However, nobody doubts that they were killed. Hence Q 4:158 could mean in a similar sense that Jesus has been rescued by God without denying his physical death. Moreover, the Qurʾān makes clear several times that God is the true ruler of history. This means that it is not Muhammad who kills his enemies but God (Q 8:17). The Qurʾān even says explicitly that nobody dies without God's permission (Q 3:145). Hence it might be possible that Q 4:157–58 simply wants to say that God was the one who made Jesus' death on the cross possible and that God at the same time is the one who rescues him from death.

Keeping this in mind it becomes very important to analyze the context and the content of Q 4:157–58 in more detail. First of all, it is important to see that the Qurʾān accepts the judgment of Jesus' crucifixion and that Jesus faces this torturous death.¹¹ This being the case, one cannot assume that the Qurʾān wants to eliminate the memory of

10. Todd Lawson, *The Crucifixion and the Qur'an: A Study in the History of Muslim Thought* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2009), 95, 143. For the discussion of this important contribution, see also Tobias Specker, "Das Kreuz—der trennende theologische Skandal" [The Cross—The Separating Theological Scandal] *Theologisch-Praktische Quartalsschrift* 161, no. 3 (2013): 243–52.

11. Kenneth Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim: An Exploration* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1985), 168.

the cross completely but can quite naturally ask the question whether the Qurʾān is not making a completely different point.

So let us have a closer look at the verses. They contain a conversation between God and the Jews, with the latter claiming to have killed Jesus. God, however, does not deny Jesus' crucifixion and his death in general, but only denies that the Jews did it.¹² Another possible interpretation of this passage could therefore be that it emphasizes that God is always the one who acts and thus does not render control or responsibility to anyone else. With this interpretation in mind, the Jews would be wrong to claim to have done something that actually had been determined by God's will of providence. Moreover, it would not be torture and death that would have defined Jesus of Nazareth but that he was exalted upon God and that he rose from the dead.

What is striking here is the fact that God is not talking to Christians but to Jews in this passage. If God wants to inform Christians that Jesus was not crucified, it will make a lot of sense to talk to them. And God talks many times to Christians in the Qurʾān. Hence it is disturbing that God does not address Christians in our passage. In Q 4:157–58 the Jews are criticized as in the previous verses. Obviously the Qurʾān wants to make clear that it was not within the power of the Jews to kill Jesus. The death of Jesus was only possible because God wanted it, not because of the power of the Jews. It makes a lot of sense to conceive a polemical context for this claim. Muslim tradition tells us a lot about different struggles, which Muhammad and his followers had with different Jewish tribes. It makes a lot of sense to imagine that Muhammad tried to argue against them with claiming prophetic authority for himself. The Jews might have responded that they are not afraid of these claims. They might have said that they even killed Jesus who claimed to be much more than a prophet. In this line of interpretation, God's reaction would defend the prophet against this pretension.

In this interpretation, the message of the passage is not that nothing can harm a prophet but that a prophet can only be harmed and killed if God allows it. In the case of Jesus, the Qurʾān makes clear

12. Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim*, 170.

that he and his message were not eliminated by the aggression of his opponents. In light of Hans Zirker's arguments, it could even be concluded that the Qur'ānic depiction of the circumstances of Jesus' crucifixion allows to interpret that in his (real) death on the cross, Jesus has won out over death.¹³ Zirker reaches the unexpected conclusion that sura 4:156–59 can be understood as an affirmation of the Christian confession of resurrection.¹⁴ He argues, "Jesus' opponents wanted to defeat him with the crucifixion; they thought they could destroy the one sent by God. It seems like they have indeed succeeded in this; but they deluded themselves. Death has not prevailed over Jesus; God has exalted him onto Himself. . . . In such paraphrase the text [of the Qur'ān] becomes a piece of the Easter-proclamation."¹⁵

Mahmoud Ayoub also agrees with the Qur'ān's ultimate rejection of the notion that humankind could have the power to destroy God's Word.¹⁶ Since his arguments are in line with Christian interpretations, it could be suggested that his interpretations of Jesus of Nazareth possibly have the potential to be Christologically appreciated and thus are able to offer Christians important new insights.

Is God in the Qur'ān beyond All Pains and Sorrows?

The theological explanation, which is usually given for the denial of Jesus' death on the cross, is the Qur'ānic conviction that God has the power to protect his prophets from any harm.¹⁷ But does God

13. Hans Zirker, *Islam. Theologische und gesellschaftliche Herausforderungen* [Islam: Theological and Societal Challenges] (Düsseldorf: Patmos Verlag, 1993), 135–42.

14. Zirker, *Islam*, 136, referring to John 3:14, 12:34; Acts 2:33; and Philippians 2:9. Considering the Qur'ānic text, Zirker believes the interpretation he argues for to be legitimate. However, he has only little hope that devout Muslims will follow his mediation proposal since it, too, overtly corresponds with to the Christian creed. In my opinion, the perspective of comparative theology as a new context of discussion offers the chance that Islamic theology also could accept Zirker's interpretation as a possibility.

15. Zirker, *Islam*, 141 (my translation). Zirker, however, immediately subsequent to this interpretation, is aware that this interpretation poses the danger of claiming to understand theology better than the theology does itself. Therefore, one will have to wait to see how Muslims receive such an interpretation. Mahmoud Ayoub has already done important groundwork in this respect.

16. Ayoub, *A Muslim View of Christianity*, 176.

17. Anja Middelbeck-Varwick, *Cum aestimatione. Konturen einer christlichen Islamtheologie* [With Estimation: Outline of a Christian Theology of Islam] (Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2017), 130.

really use this power? Are prophets protected from harm? If we take a closer look at the Qurʾān, we will see that often the opposite is true. The prophets are ridiculed (Q 15:11), accused of lying (Q 3:184, 22:42, 23:44, 35:25) and having a jumble of dreams (Q 21:5), their message is rejected (Q 11:59), and the prophet is seen as a sorcerer or a madman (Q 51:52). They were expelled from their land (Q 14:13), and many times it is mentioned they were killed (Q 2:61, 91; 4:155; 3:21, 112, 181). Hence it is completely impossible to pretend that in the Qurʾān God protects the prophets from any harm. The Qurʾān is aware of how badly people treat prophets.

If we look at the life of Muhammad, we can also see that there were times when he was expelled from his hometown and when he felt lonely and helpless. He also experienced the dark sides of war, and it is not the Qurʾānic idea that there was an insurmountable safety barrier protecting him from any harm. Hence the Qurʾān knows that humans who are chosen for the service of God can nonetheless suffer.

However, the question remains how God is involved in this story. Does God suffer himself, is He involved in the struggle of His people, is there a passion of God in the Qurʾān? To be more precise, we have to ask for the passion of God's word in the Qurʾān. At least, even for the Christian tradition it is disputed whether God suffers Himself. But the passion of Christ, that is, the passion of His Word, is one third of the gospel and one of the basic features of Christianity. If we search for something comparable in the Qurʾān, we have to look at the Qurʾān itself. For it is the Qurʾān that is most prominently God's Word in the Qurʾānic perspective. If we ask for a passion of God's Word, we will have to look how the Qurʾān as God's Word is welcomed by the people.

What is striking here is the fact that the Qurʾān is rejected by the people and that the vocabulary that is used to describe this rejection is quite similar to the vocabulary used in the Gospel to describe the rejection of Christ. As Daniel Madigan makes clear, there are many expressions that use the language of the Bible. Madigan enumerates the following expressions from the Qurʾān, which all express the rejection of the people against the Qurʾān and are at the same time all quotations

from the Gospel: “to mock at” (Q 4:140, 9:65), “to argue about” (Q 40:4, 35, 56, 69; 42:35), “to plunge into idle talk about” (Q 6:68), “to scoff at” (Q 37:14), “to strive against” (Q 22:51; 34:5, 38), “to shrug off” (Q 7:175), “to sell” (Q 2:41; 3:199; 5:44, 9:9), “to wrong” (Q 7:9, 103), “to thwart” (Q 22:51; 34:5, 38); “to turn away from” (Q 6:4, 157; 21:32); “to pay no attention to” (Q 7:136; 10:7, 92), “to consider oneself more important than” (Q 6:93; 7:36, 40, 133; 45:8), “to blaspheme against” (Q 41:40), “to plot against” (Q 10:21); “to deny” (Q 40:81), and “to forget” (Q 20:126).¹⁸ It is quite impressive in how many ways the rejection of God’s Word is expressed in the Qur’ān and how close this witness comes to the passion of God in the Gospel. Madigan resumes, “One might say that God’s revelation has a kind of passion even if not a death. It is rejected and accused of making false claims to a divine origin, it is dismissed as nothing more than poetry, lies, sorcery, old-wives tales or the product of a conspiracy with foreigners.”¹⁹

However, the rejection of God’s Word does not necessarily cause pains in God’s essence. It depends on the concept of revelation whether God is affected by it. In Christian theology, it is the concept of revelation as self-communication, which makes the idea so compelling that God is involved Himself through the passion of Christ. And it is the reception of modern freewill theism that highlights God’s involvement against traditional metaphysical claims of God’s immutability.²⁰ Thus, it depends on the reaction of Muslim theology toward those tendencies in freewill philosophy whether the Qur’ān will be interpreted in a way that it also witnesses the passion of God because of the rejection of His messengers and His message. Mouhanad Khorchide is a prominent example in Germany for a Muslim scholar who wants to defend God’s ability to suffer with the help of freewill philosophy in line with the Qur’ān.²¹

18. Daniel Madigan, “God’s Word to the World: Jesus and the Qur’ān, Incarnation and Recitation,” in *“Godhead Here in Hiding”: Incarnation and the History of Human Suffering*, ed. T. Merrigan and F. Glorieux (Leuven: Peeters, 2012), 151.

19. Madigan, “God’s Word to the World,” 151.

20. For the English-speaking context, see Clark Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God’s Openness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001).

21. Mouhanad Khorchide and Klaus von Stosch, *The Other Prophet: Jesus in the Qur’ān*, trans. Simon Pare (London: Gingko Press, 2019), chap. 6. In the following passages I refer to those parts of this chapter, which were originally written by Khorchide.

In his recent book on Jesus in the Qurʾān Khorchide argues that God identifies with the poor people and asks us to lend God a loan of goodness (Q 57:11). In his interpretation, it is God who exposes himself to humans through this action. Moreover, Khorchide argues that God criticizes everybody “who mistreats the orphan” and who “does not encourage the feeding of the poor” (Q 107:2–3). Again he thinks that this shows how much God is involved in people’s behavior toward oppressed people. His line of thinking at this point can easily be connected to Islamic liberation theology, and it highlights how much God is caring for those who are oppressed and that the Qurʾān has to be read in solidarity with them.²²

But Khorchide goes beyond theologians of liberation. Together with those theologians, he claims that God is caring for us: “God intends to lighten your burden, for the human being was created weak” (Q 4:28). God is perceived as a God who sees and hears the sorrows of human beings (Q 20:46) and tries to liberate them. But Khorchide wants to say more. He thinks that God is not only insulted but also hurt by the rejection of His message through humans (Q 33:57). And he insists that this causes pains to God because he understands the Qurʾān as God’s self-communication.

Hence he argues that those Qurʾānic passages that describe God’s love to humans imply that God makes himself vulnerable. For him, God’s commitment to humans becomes obvious when the Qurʾān says that “God loves the charitable” (Q 2:195) and “the repentant, and He loves those who keep clean” (Q 2:222), “the pious” (Q 3:76) and “the equitable” (Q 5:42). Additionally, in Khorchide’s interpretation God feels pain and He suffers when the Qurʾān witnesses that “God does not love the faithless” (Q 3:32), “the aggressors” (Q 2:190), “the arro-

22. Farid Esack, *Qurʾan, Liberation and Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity against Oppression* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1997). However, Khorchide himself criticizes liberation theology and wants to be seen more in the tradition of liberal theology: Mouhanad Khorchide, “Theologie der Befreiung statt Theologie der Armen. Eine kritische Reflexion aus islamischer Sicht” [Theology of Liberation Instead of Theology of the Poor People: A Critical Assessment from Muslim Perspective], in *Gott und Befreiung. Befreiungstheologische Konzepte in Islam und Christentum* [God and Liberation: Liberation-Theological Concepts in Islam and Christianity], Beiträge zur Komparativen Theologie [Contributions to Comparative Theology] 5, ed. M. Tatari and K. von Stosch (Paderborn u.a.: Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh, 2012), 97–113.

gant showoff” (Q 4:36), the “treacherous” (Q 8:58), and “the seekers of corruption” (Q 28:77). The language of love between God and humans shows that God is involved in human history, that He shares their hopes and sorrows, and that He suffers if they do not welcome His love and compassion. God seems to do everything to convince people to accept His invitation to faith. And if they risk to lose their connection to God, “God will bring a people whom He loves and who love Him” (Q 5:54). Hence this loving relationship seems to be the best witness for God’s purpose with His people. In this passage it is mutual and reciprocal and shows God’s great empathy with humans.

It is obvious that there are other readings of those Qur’anic verses that Khorchide uses for his interpretation. But his interpretation fits well to Khorchide’s theology of mercy.²³ In this theological paradigm it is God’s compassion that characterizes God’s very essence. And this compassion involves pain and love, and it portrays a God who cares for His people and who suffers with them in their agony. I am not sure if it is really convincing to pretend that the Qur’anic God remains in a “safe distance” in such an interpretation.²⁴ It is true that the Christian idea of incarnation remains an important distinguishing element between Islam and Christianity. But as the idea of God’s physical costs cannot be literally true in a coherent Christian theology of incarnation, it is also clear that the adoption of the concept of self-communication within a metaphysics of free will shapes traditional Muslim interpretations, and we still have to wait to see the kind of consequences this can have for a Muslim theology of God’s passion.

23. Mouhanad Khorchide, *Islam ist Barmherzigkeit: Grundzüge einer modernen Religion* [Islam Is Mercy: Outlines of a Modern Religion] (Freiburg-Basel-Wien: Herder, 2012); Mouhanad Khorchide, Milad Karimi, and Klaus von Stosch, eds., *Theologie der Barmherzigkeit? Zeitgemäße Fragen und Antworten des Kalām* [Theology of Mercy? Questions and Answers from Kalam], Schriftenreihe Graduiertenkolleg Islamische Theologie [Research Training Group Islamic Theology Series of Publications] 1 (Münster; New York: Waxmann, 2014).

24. Madigan, “God’s Word to the World,” 151: “However distressing it may be to God and the Messenger that the revelations are maltreated in this way, that distress is always at a safe distance. It never becomes physical. It is the costly physicality of the incarnation and thus the passion of the Word which is central in the Christian view of things, and thus distinguishes the Christian view of God from the Qur’anic view.”

Let me conclude this essay with a hadith that often is quoted by Khorchide to prove how much God cares for His people and which exists in several versions.

Verily Allah rejoices more about the repentance of His slave than a man who loads his provisions on his camel then travels until he is in the wilderness, then the time for a nap comes, so he dismounts and takes a nap beneath a tree, but sleep overwhelms him and his camel runs away. Then he wakes up and climbs a hill but he does not see anything. Then he climbs a second hill but he does not see anything. Then he climbs a third hill but he does not see anything, so he goes back to the place where he took his nap, and while he is sitting there, his camel comes walking and places its reins in his hands. Allah rejoices more over the repentance of His slave than this man when he finds his camel as it has left him.²⁵

The great joy of God in this narration reminds Christian readers of God's joy in the parable of the lost son (Luke 15:11–32) or in the parable of the one sheep that got lost (Luke 15:3–7). God is portrayed in a way that makes clear how much God cares and how much He is involved.

Epilogue: The Death on the Cross as a Necessary Means of Salvation?

A more thorough examination of our topic would need a discussion of the question of soteriology now. In this context we could discuss whether there is any salvific necessity in the death on the cross. The inner-Christian debate is very controversial at this point, and I am not able to go through the different arguments in depth. Let me just mention as a starting point for this investigation that there is no need to develop the concept of salvation with the help of the doctrine of original sin and the redemptive suffering on the cross. In the tradition of the Eastern churches we can determine salvation also as deification.²⁶ Actually this approach is quite common in German theology today. The

25. Sahih Al Muslim 49: The Book of Repentance, No. 6958, accessed January 27, 2020, <https://archive.org/stream/SahihMuslim-Arabic-english7Vol.Set/SahihMuslimVol.7-ahadith6723-7563#page/n119/mode/2up>.

26. Gisbert Greshake, "Der Wandel der Erlösungsvorstellungen in der Theologiegeschichte" [The Change of Concepts of Redemption in the History of Theology], in *Erlösung und Emanzipation* [Salvation and Emancipation], Quaestiones Disputatae 61, ed. L. Scheffczyk, 69–101 (Freiburg-Basel-Wien: Herder, 1973).

basic reason for this shift of soteriology away from the doctrine of sin is Nietzsche's criticism of Christianity. Nietzsche argues that people do not suffer because of their sins and that they do not need the Christian message of salvation.²⁷ I do not want to discuss here whether Nietzsche's diagnosis is correct. I simply want to remind us that this kind of criticism led to a shift in the understanding of salvation—at least in the German-speaking context²⁸—which is highly interesting for Muslim–Christian dialogue. For Muslims have similar problems with the Christian idea of sins as some modern philosophers have. Hence it might be fruitful not to take the doctrine of (original) sin as the starting point for the doctrine of salvation but to follow the advice of Dietrich Bonhoeffer to confront humans with the Gospel in their strength, not in their weaknesses.²⁹

One way of doing this can be a theology of free will, which tries to show that the human free will needs God's love and communion to be satisfied or to be fulfilled. I developed this argument and its relation to the cross in some length elsewhere.³⁰ Let me simply summarize its result for our context here: Humans long for unconditional love without being able to finally fulfill this desire. God incarnate in Jesus Christ is a way for God to meet this desire and fulfill the desperate need for a love, which overcomes death. Hence in the Christian doctrine of salvation, the sender, the message, and the means of salvation are identi-

27. Friedrich Nietzsche, "Die fröhliche Wissenschaft" [The Joyful Wisdom], in Friedrich Nietzsche, *Kritische Studienausgabe* [Critical Edition for Study Purpose], book 3, no. 138, ed. G. Colli and M. Montinari (Neuausgabe München: dtv Verlagsgesellschaft, 1999), 488.

28. As a paradigmatic example; Thomas Pröpper, *Erlösungsglaube und Freiheitsgeschichte. Eine Skizze zur Soteriologie* [Faith in Salvation and History of Free Will: An Outline of Soteriology] (München: Kösel, 1991).

29. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Widerstand und Ergebung. Briefe und Aufzeichnungen aus der Haft* [Resistance and Forgiveness: Letters and Records from Detention], ed. E. Bethge (Gütersloh: Verlag, 1994), 139, 141 (entry from April 30, 1944): "Sollen wir ein paar Unglückliche in ihrer schwachen Stunde überfallen und sie sozusagen religiös vergewaltigen? . . . ich möchte von Gott nicht an den Grenzen, sondern in der Mitte, nicht in den Schwächen, sondern in der Kraft, nicht also bei Tod und Schuld, sondern im Leben und im Guten des Menschen sprechen" ["Or should we jump on a few unfortunates in their hour of weakness and commit, so to speak, religious rape? . . . I'd like to speak of God not at the boundaries but in the center, not in weakness but in strength, not in death and guilt but in human life and human goodness"], Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Letter to Eberhard Bethge, April 30, 1944," in *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 363, 366–67.

30. Klaus von Stosch, "Über Erlösung reden" [Talking about Salvation], *Religionsunterricht an höheren Schulen* 52, no. 2 (2009): 80–87.

cal. The message of the Christian doctrine of salvation is unconditional love, that is, a love that is able to overcome all sin, despair, and death. The origin of this message is God Himself, who is pure and unconditional love. The means of communication of this love is the self-surrender of the life of Jesus, which can be understood as the real symbol³¹ of God's true love to humans. Thus, God's love is the sender (Father), the message (Son), and the means (Holy Spirit) of salvation because it is the Holy Spirit that enables us to open ourselves to God's love and to be in communion with Him.³²

It is obvious that Muslims will not agree with such a Trinitarian account of salvation. But nonetheless every Muslim can acknowledge that humans are in need of fulfillment and love and that this fulfillment comes from God Himself. Muslims can admit that humans are in need of the mercy of God who wants to fulfill their hearts. If we understand the Qur'^{ān} as God's self-communication, we can understand this scripture as the self-manifestation of God's mercy or as God's love letter to humankind, as Reza Aslan puts it.³³ If God is mercy in His very essence, as theologians such as Khorchide argue,³⁴ the message, the sender, and the means of God's self-communication to humankind are identical again. God, who is pure compassion, shows His compassion through the message of the Qur'^{ān} with the purpose of being merciful. For Muslims, however, it is very important not to neglect the importance of justice in this context.³⁵ The final aim of this compassion is a communion of humanity with God in complete justice and pure love.

31. Real symbol is used here as equivalent for the German Realsymbol, which has become quite prominent in recent theology. In defense of this Rahnerian concept, see Magnus Lerch, *Selbstmitteilung Gottes. Herausforderungen einer freiheitstheoretischen Offenbarungstheologie* [God's Self-communication: Challenges for a Theology of Revelation within Free Will Theism], Ratio fidei 56 (Regensburg, Germany: Pustet, 2015).

32. For the Trinitarian background of this idea, see Klaus von Stosch, *Trinität* [Trinity] (Paderborn: Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh, 2017).

33. Reza Aslan, *No god but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam* (New York: Random House 2006), 201.

34. Khorchide, *Islam ist Barmherzigkeit*.

35. Muna Tatari, *Gott und Mensch im Spannungsverhältnis von Gerechtigkeit und Barmherzigkeit. Versuch einer islamisch begründeten Positionsbestimmung* [God and Man in the Tension of Justice and Mercy: Attempt of a Muslim Assessment], Graduiertenkolleg Islamische Theologie [Islamic Theology Research Training Group] 4 (Münster: Waxmann, 2016).

Especially Sufi tradition provides a lot of beautiful images to illustrate this aim. Let me simply end with one of those images:

You are my breath,
 My hope,
 My companion,
 My craving,
 My abundant wealth.
 Without You—my Life, my Love—
 I would never have wandered across these endless countries . . .
 I look everywhere for Your love—
 Then I am suddenly filled with it.
 O Captain of my Heart,
 Radiant Eye of Yearning in my breast,
 I will never be free from You
 As long as I live.
 Be satisfied with me, Love,
 And I am satisfied.³⁶

Although this Sufi perspective is a controversial possibility of understanding Islam, the high importance of mercy and compassion is very prominent in the Muslim tradition. Hence if we use the tradition of modern freewill philosophy to understand Islamic thinking, it will be possible from a Muslim point of view to understand how humans need salvation (understood as communion with God) and how this salvation can be provided through God's self-communication in the Qur'ān. Such an understanding will lead to new insights in Christian–Muslim encounters that challenge the traditional ways of opposing both religions.

For comparative theology, this makes clear that we need much more time for investigations in anthropology and the theology of revelation of both religions before we can start to relate both religions in their concepts of salvation. Probably we will further need an ongoing process of developing our doctrines in mutual exchange without aiming at a definitive response in near future.

36. Aslan, *No god but God*, 212.