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A common word between us and you:
observations on the (mis)uses of Koranic exegesis in interreligious dialogue

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In mid-October 2007, to coincide with the end of Ramadan on October 13th, the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, Amman (Jordan), published an open letter headed ‘A Common Word Between Us and You’ to Pope Benedict XVI and other Christian leaders. The number and standing of its signatories—138 Muslim religious officials and *bona fide* scholars from the entire world—as well as the circumstances of its publication, including its endorsement by members of Jordan’s Hashemite dynasty, lent it weight and called attention to its professed purpose, the advancement of Muslim-Christian dialogue and amity. Actually, reactions have not ceased coming in, usually—and in keeping with the letter’s tone—politely phrased and well-meaning, even if not uniformly uncritical. Quite apart from the letter’s antecedents and ‘proximate causes’, foremost among them Benedict’s Regensburg speech of September 2006 and the response by 38 Muslims on 13 October 2006, and its institutional anchoring, it deserves to be taken seriously in itself as a document of contemporary—mainstream?—Koranic exegesis and beyond that, as an articulation of Muslim ‘Abrahamic’ (albeit virtually excluding Judaism) inter-monotheist dialogic thought. In this paper, the Arabic version of the letter, although secondary to the English, will be scrutinized predominantly in terms of the ‘classical’ and received Tafsīr to which it expressly and repeatedly appeals. It will be shown to subject the scriptural witness to a highly selective and situatively motivated, if not to say opportunistic, revisionist reading, while totally neglecting to provide a coherent hermeneutics. In particular, the letter’s exegesis of Q 2: 256 will be demonstrated to fail on two counts, neither honoring received interpretations (cf. Crone, *God’s rule*, 2004) nor offering a Koranically cogent argument for freedom of religion in terms of current human rights theory (cf. Mohamed Talbi, “Religious liberty”, in: Swidler, 1986). In conclusion, the scriptural evidence marshalled by the signatories invalidates rather than strengthens their plea for Muslim-Christian understanding.

The notes here sounded may strike many an ear as plain cacophonous, given the extremely courteous tone of goodwill adopted in the letter itself. However, in this paper, discussion and scrutiny will not focus on the signatories’ professed intentions; rather the analytic tools an Arabist and ‘Islamicist’ has at his disposal will serve to scrutinize the letter’s general line of reasoning and specifically, some of the scriptural testimony appealed to.

As long as interreligious dialogue and understanding is to be scripturally—in the given case, Koranically—undergirded, a commensurate hermeneutics would appear to be an indispensable precondition, especially in view of the traditionally prevalent reading of such scripture in a juridical frame of reference. Now it may appear hopelessly naïve and unrealistic to expect a self-styled ‘open letter’ over multiple signatures to engage in an exercise of scriptural, here: Koranic hermeneutics. However, even if for the moment the letter’s well-intentioned exegesis were accepted as conclusive, its authors’ silence concerning legal, i.e. *sharī’a* norms pertaining to non-Muslims in Muslim polities does, to put it paradoxically, resound rather loudly. And obviously, while on the subject of interreligious relations, at present not only members of the Koranically recognized scriptural faiths—Jews (mostly ignored by the letter), Christians, Zoroastrians—but also Buddhists, Hindus and, perhaps more to the point, adherents of post-Islamic religions such as the Druze, Alevi and Bahā’ī as well as agnostics and outright atheists will have to be accorded equal rights if intra- and inter-societal peace and cooperation for the common good are to be achieved. As far as Koranic exegesis is concerned, this poses the challenge of formulating a coherent authentication of freedom of religion as defined in contemporary Human Rights discourse and legislation. The letter’s failure to meet this challenge is apt to raise doubts about its commitment to the ostensible purpose.

Still, the expression of fundamental doubts and reservations would seem precipitate as long as the letter had not been duly taken note of and examined on its own terms, in particular as to its deployment of scriptural and other textual witness. Clearly, even finding in favor of the letter on this count will not by itself render more principal questions moot, namely the

validity of its underlying approach to the issue of interreligious peace and understanding. After all, and still within a religious frame of reference, this noble goal could conceivably be attained more easily along alternative conceptual trajectories, whether or not scripture were their point of departure.

The letter's very beginning, namely its title, 'A Common Word Between Us and You',¹ is likely to cast a pall over the entire venture. Given that the letter itself defers to the *tafsīr* by Abū Ja'far aṭ-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923)² as early and authoritative, it follows that readers doing the same cannot legitimately be accused of misconstruing the letter's intentions—unless one were to impute to the authors a certain lack of stringency, if not to say opportunism, appealing to aṭ-Ṭabarī one moment and ignoring him the next just as it suited them. Thus merely taking a lead from the letter itself, aṭ-Ṭabarī's testimony will here be called upon on more than one occasion, but not because he were the only respectable and widely received *mufassir*³—not to mention modern academic textual analysis.

At the merest glance, the context of sura III demonstrates that there is no question of finding an intentionally neutral criterion for adjudicating between the 'people of scripture' and the 'Muslims';⁴ rather, at issue is apologetics and polemic insofar as the former group—here primarily Christians—are accused of deviating from the standard held up before them, namely Koranically defined monotheism. Beginning with v. 33, the entire section develops, including the narrative of Elizabeth's miraculous pregnancy with John the future Baptist, a coherent Mariology and—not Christology, but Jesu-logy; emphasis is put on God's creative omnipotence which is not bound by any law or rule of nature but wills into existence whomever he pleases. Thus the analogy between God's creation of Jesus by his sovereign command as addressed to Mary and of Adam's creation without any human, parental mediation is stressed in opposition to unnamed disputants;⁵ neither aṭ-Ṭabarī nor those dependent on him have ever voiced doubts concerning the addressees' identity; they were said to have been a delegation of Christians from Najrān.⁶ The next two verses (62-63) close the preceding sequence and at the same time, serve as a transition to what follows:

¹ sura III (Āl 'Imrān), 64

² Muḥammad b. Jarīr aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān 'an ta'wīl āyi l-Qur'ān*, 30 vols, ed. Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī² 1373/1954 (hereinafter abbreviated to aṭ-Ṭabarī)

³ Even if only taking into account sunnite authors, the letter's selection of exegetes would seem quite restrictive; in addition to aṭ-Ṭabarī it just includes the Mamlūk period writers Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1372) and al-Jalālīn (i.e. al-Maḥallī, d. 864/1459, and as-Suyūṭī, d. 911/1505), to the exclusion of such prominent scholars as az-Zamaḵsharī (d. 538/1144) and Faḵhr ad-Dīn ar-Rāzī (d. 606/1209). Authors of the twentieth century might have been too controversial to begin with.

⁴ Perhaps the Koranic appeal to the divinely ordained plurality of religious communities to compete in good deeds (Paret: for good things; sura V: 48) would rather have met this qualification; the authors quote it towards the conclusion of the letter. Admittedly, though, even there the attribution of 'moods' (Paret: [personal] inclinations) to unnamed non-Muslims represents a certain exegetical challenge; cf. aṭ-Ṭabarī VI 268:-7 – 269:5, 272:-10 etc.

⁵ The Muslim reception of the text is well illustrated by aṭ-Ṭabarī's exegesis of verse 45 (III 270:15-17): [Then] when the angels said: 'Mary! God announces to you a word of his own whose name is al-Masīḥ Jesus, son of Mary!' He—magnified be his praise!—informed his servants of Jesus's descent, namely, that he was the son of his mother Mary. Thus he ruled out for him what those among the Nazarenes (an-Naṣārā) who deviate from God—magnified be his praise!—attribute to him, in that they attribute to him sonship from God, and what those among the Jews who spread lies against his mother slander her with.

⁶ aṭ-Ṭabarī, *ibid.*, p. 295:1-8; cf. p. 298:18-20 (*re v.* 62)

(62) This is the account that agrees with the truth. There is no god but God, and assuredly God is the All-mighty, the All-wise. (63) And if they turn their backs, assuredly God knows the workers of corruption.⁷

This is followed by verse 64, which is pivotal for the open letter under discussion (I quote from its English version):

Say: O People of the Scripture! Come to a common word between us and you: that we shall worship none but God, and that we shall ascribe no partner unto Him, and that none of us shall take others for lords beside God. And if they turn away, then say: Bear witness that we are they who have surrendered (unto Him).

It is important to note that the English rendering ‘a common word between us and you’ provides a particular interpretation of a formulation which gave rise to much discussion in the classical *tafsīr* literature. Paret tentatively suggests ‘a word of equitable balance’. The continuation of the verse is open to variant interpretations too; the letter treats the sequence: that we shall worship, &ct, as the content of the ‘common word’, whereas Paret has the first sentence end after ‘you’ (i.e. ‘between us and you). At the beginning of the second sentence he adds a bracketed ‘let’s agree’ which then governs the following clause ‘that we shall worship’ &ct. The argument with Jews and Christian continues for a few more verses, but even the very next one, 65, makes an important statement regarding the position of the two communities: People of Scripture. Why do you dispute concerning Abraham? The Torah was not sent down, neither the Gospel, but after him. What, have you no reason?

This short excerpt from sura III is sufficient to demonstrate that considerable exegetical effort is required for verse 64 to function as scriptural basis for peaceful relations between Muslims and Christians—not to mention the Jews; in the quoted passage, they remain unnamed, but are cast in the role of contemporaneous deniers of Jesus’ prophetic mission and conspirators against his life. They and subsequent generations of similar bent are threatened with humiliation until the last judgment and with severe punishment in this life and the hereafter.

Momentous, even portentous announcements of this nature cannot fail to elicit questions in the listener or reader, such as that of the manner of earthly, or even human execution of the punishment that the text envisages for the mentioned unbelievers. Evidently the answer might be sought in the *tafsīr* tradition, but that will have to be deferred to some future occasion. Nevertheless, at the latest at this juncture, the question can no longer be evaded of the viability and sustainability of Christian-Muslim understanding in the absence of an analogous engagement with Judaism. Without in the least denying the destructive potential of the Israel-Palestine conflict in virtually every medium of human interaction, such interaction, at the level of communication at which the letter operates, must not be subverted by stereotyping or otherwise dehumanizing perceptions of ‘the other’ as engendered or at least fostered by the conflict.⁸

In all likelihood it would be a misperception of the exigencies of an ‘open letter’, especially one hoping to attract a wide range of signatories, to expect expressly and coherently formulated criteria for its scriptural exegesis. However, the letter does not merely

⁷ Unless otherwise noted, Koranic quotations are from Arthur J. Arberry’s *The Koran interpreted*, London: Allen & Unwin 1955 (here from the 1964 edition by Oxford University Press, and with occasional slight revisions by myself).

⁸ See below for intimations of collectivizing prejudice. – As regards Muslim-Christian relations, two brief observations may be in order: first, the Christian canon of scripture includes the Old Testament, as the letter acknowledges in its selection of quotations, and second, Christians too profess the unabjured, indissoluble validity of God’s covenant with Israel (the historic premisses of this Christian belief need not be discussed here).

refer, as mentioned above, to Abū Jaʿfar aṭ-Ṭabarī in a general way, but precisely in the context of a clause in III 64 that is vital for the letter’s entire argument: ‘that none of us shall take others for lords beside God’. It is hard to believe how harmonizing tendencies all but turn the meaning of aṭ-Ṭabarī’s interpretation on its head, as will shortly be explicated. It is no more than to be expected that aṭ-Ṭabarī here, in III 64, reads the charge which elsewhere the Koran expressly levels against Christians and for which aṭ-Ṭabarī adduces sura IX:

(30) The Jews say: “‘Uzair⁹ is the son of God.” And the Nazarenes¹⁰ say: “Al-Masīḥ¹¹ is the son of God.” That is the utterance of their mouths, conforming with the unbelievers before them. God assail them! How they are perverted! (31) They have taken their rabbis and their monks as lords apart from God, and al-Masīḥ, Mary’s son—and they were commanded to serve but One God; there is no god but He; glory be to Him, above that they associate—

In accordance with the Koran’s prophetology, Jesus himself is expressly exempted from the incrimination here formulated; cf. III 50f: “...I have come to you with a sign from your Lord; so fear you God, and obey you me. Surely God is *my Lord and your Lord*;¹² so serve Him. This is a straight path.”

Moreover, the Koranic Jesus emphatically opposes his adherents’ deviance (V 116):

And when God said: “O Jesus son of Mary, didst thou say unto men ‘Take me and my mother as gods, apart from God?’” he said: “To Thee be glory! It is not mine to say what I have no right to. If I indeed said it, Thou knowest it, ...

Regardless of the measure of agreement between the Koranic representation of Christian trinitarianism and its historic reality—at the very least in major and majoritarian Christian denominations—the differences between Christian *Christology* and Koranic *Jesology* cannot honestly be glossed over as the open letter does:¹³

Muslims recognize Jesus Christ as the Messiah, not in the same way Christians do (but Christians themselves anyway have never all agreed with each other on Jesus Christ’s—peace be upon him!—nature), but in the following way:

.... *the Messiah Jesus son of Mary is a Messenger of God and His Word which he cast*

⁹ By wide consensus, the equivalent of the biblical Ezra

¹⁰ an-Naṣārā (as above, n. 5); here used for its distancing effect and to throw into relief the contrast to the term *al-Masīḥīyūʾīm* commonly used today (including the letter).

¹¹ Since at least the post-Koranic Muslim tradition no longer had a clear understanding of the Koranic title or name *al-Masīḥ*, it is preferable to leave it untranslated. Trying to elucidate its meaning, aṭ-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) refers to several authorities, but the contradictory variance of their explanations only documents a bafflement which their—and more so, their successors’—purely Arabic etymologizing does little to dispel. As a passive verbal adjective, *masīḥ* is said to mean ‘rubbed off [by God], cleansed of sin’, which supposedly lead to ‘entirely sincere, sincerely believing’; an alternative suggestion is ‘rubbed down with blessing’. If this last explanation appears to echo the original meaning ‘anointed’, any trace of it had disappeared by the time of Ibn Kathīr, another *mufasssīr* referred to in the letter. Betraying even greater uncertainty, his first explanation which he supposedly received from one of the *salaf*, refers *masīḥ* to ‘frequent travel’; according to others the name referred to flatfootedness and a low instep or alternatively, to one of the sick and leprous healed, with God’s permission, by Jesus stroking him (Ismāʿīl b. Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿaẓīm*, 4 vols & Index, Beirut: Dār al-Maʿrifā² 1407/1987, I 372:7f); cf. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, General Editor, *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, 5 vols & Index, Leiden etc.: Brill 2001-2006, III (2003), s.v. Jesus, esp. p. 12a-13a [Neal Robinson].

¹² Emphasis added in order to highlight the purely human self-perception of the Koranic Jesus.

¹³ Quite simply, the use of *Messiah* in the English text is grossly misleading: there is no Messiah in the Koran—and functional equivalents in Islam are of no concern in the present context.

unto Mary and a Spirit from Him.... (IV:171).

This reader at least finds his patience and goodwill put to a hard test by the passage just quoted. If it does not pass for disingenuousness what else in the world could? Once again, the context of the quoted verse IV 171 is a dispute with unbelievers and people of scripture. The beginning of the verse, which is suppressed in the quotation, reads: “O people of scripture! Go not beyond the bounds in your religion, and say not as to God but the truth. Al-Masīḥ Jesus, son of Mary, was only” After ‘spirit from him’ the verse continues to its end with : So believe in God and His Messengers, and say not ‘Three.’ Refrain; better is it for you. God is only One God. Glory be to Him—that He should have a son! To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and in the earth; God suffices for a guardian.

The pretence of harmlessness in the passage just quoted from the letter extends to the parenthesis with its reference to christological controversies among Christians; as for its intended meaning, there would seem to be but one inescapable inference, namely that the Koran’s Jesu-logy comfortably fits into the gamut of variant Christian Christologies—nota bene from an assumed Christian perspective since for Muslims evidently the Koran—in the given case the entire verse IV 171—remains the sole truth. In this way, the letter elegantly delegitimizes Christian creeds such as the Nicene and the Chalcedonensian-Constantinopolitan—which is not meant to imply any historical or creedal position vis-à-vis past or present Christian confessional formulae.

The progression of the letter’s argument as traced in the foregoing easily integrates reference to the, as it were, historic Jesus of the synoptic gospels and his testimony to the *Šama’ Yisrā’el* (Deuteronomy 6, 4); in this way he serves as an unsuspecting witness to a Koranically defined monotheism and, considering the subtext, at the same time as proof incontrovertible against the post-Easter church.

Further, the underhanded sideswipe against christological controversies is coupled with complete silence about the historicalness of Islam; nowhere is there any hint at intra-Muslim disputes about such issues as the ‘nature’ of the Koran¹⁴ as God’s uncreated or created speech; the status of divine attributes in relation to the unity of divine essence, or the definition of divine justice vs. divine omnipotence.¹⁵

The only novelty in the letter, if novelty is the word, consists of the twist it gives to conventional anti-Christian polemics; the argument is not simply conducted on the basis of Koranic quotations—rather these are trimmed down to fit the mold, vis-à-vis unsuspecting recipients, of substantial agreement with biblical witnesses—but it employs biblical texts in order to put more persuasively the implicit invitation to Islam (*da’wa*). In other words, notwithstanding his biblical guise, the open letter’s Jesus quite simply remains identical to the Koranic Jesus.

Statements like the foregoing patently invite objections as to their real or feigned ignorance of positions that Muslim religious scholars can realistically be expected to take.¹⁶ Obviously they could not but reaffirm the Koranic representation of Jesus as long as they chose to put their own argument into his mouth. However, ostensibly the letter’s focus of attention is not Jesus’ function in the economy of salvation, but the mutual relations of

¹⁴ In the above-quoted passage, the formulation *ṭabī’at ’Īsā* is used.

¹⁵ The only intra-Muslim disagreements to be mentioned in the notes concern the beatific vision, i.e. the problem of God’s visual or otherwise sensory self-revelation to the denizens of paradise.

¹⁶ Firm belief in the divine origin and authority of the Koran can lead to exegetical consequences of quite an opposite tendency as has been impressively demonstrated a number of times during these past few decades; a few random examples include Maḥmūd Muḥammad Ṭāḥā, Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zaid und Mohamed Talbi (see also further down).

Muslims and Christians *at present and in future*. Yet the most zealous endeavors to overcome a past of conflict, estrangement and irritation and to establish enduring peace and amity between the two communities will be doomed as long as they are based on the appeal to a purportedly shared monotheism whose definition *a priori* put the addressees in the wrong.¹⁷

All but breathtaking—if not indeed but self-consistent—in this context is the reference to sura IX as scriptural witness for the importance of the fear of God. The long verse 36, of which in the letter merely its brief finishing clause is quoted: ‘and know that God is with the godfearing’ —urgently exhorts Muslims to fight against polytheists as long as they in turn fight against the Muslims; as just seen, it ends on a note of admonition and encouraging promise. The above-quoted verses 30-31 elaborate on the preceding appeal, in verse 29, to fight the ‘people of scripture’ until their humble submission. Verses 32 and 34-35 also polemicize against Jews and Christians,¹⁸ whereas v. 37 completes the subject of calendric intercalation which in v. 36 had been introduced as an example of excessive unbelief. The two following verses 38-39 are quoted unabridged:

(38) O believers, what is amiss with you, that when it is said to you: “Go forth in the way of God,” you are stuck to the ground?¹⁹ Are you so content with this present life, rather than the world to come? Yet the enjoyment of this present life, compared with the world to come, is a little thing. (39) If you go not forth, He will chastise you with a painful chastisement, and instead of you He will substitute another people; and you will not hurt Him anything, for God is powerful over everything.

This much will do for the ‘fear of God’ made out to be the Islamic equivalent of ‘Hear o Israel’ (Deuteronomy 6:4: *Shema’ Yisrā’el*) and its sequels in the synoptic gospels. The letter engages at some length in would-be philological exercise to elucidate a number—by no means all—of the relevant new-testament, Greek,²⁰ and old-testament, Hebrew, terms,²¹ not without reference to Jesus’ own, Aramaic, mother-tongue. This effort strangely, and significantly, contrasts with the letter’s cavalier attitude towards the diverse nuances and usages of *al-Masīh* in particular, but also of the Koranic *ḥubb* (“love”) and its derivations.²² In the letter, the ostensible effort to verify biblical terminology and its transmission through various languages is paralleled, or rather contrasted, by an—unreflected?—avoidance or

¹⁷ Besides the mentioned examples, the letter engages in other questionable interpretive gambits, such as the attempted ‘Islamization’ of the command of love of neighbor; the mere reference to a *ḥadīth* does not carry much weight as long as its impact (or lack thereof) throughout history is not considered at all.

¹⁸ The first subject to be raised is their polytheism which they vainly try to obscure God’s light with; follow comments on numerous (Jewish) scholars and (Christian) monks whose defrauding of believers and avarice will earn them painful punishment in hell. In between, the oft-quoted verse 33 is interposed: It is He who has sent His Messenger with the guidance and the religion of truth, that He may uplift it above every religion, though the unbelievers be averse.

¹⁹ Arberry: ‘you sink down heavily to the ground’ (Paret: Why do you lower your heads?)

²⁰ καρδία, ψυχή, δίανοια, ισχύς; *heart, soul, mind, strength* in the King James Version (s. n. 21)

²¹ *Deuteronomy* 6:4-5: לב, נפש, מאד; note the erroneous Arabic transcription of *lēb* as *lyf* (given the etymological correspondence of the Hebrew *lēb* and Arabic *lubb*, it is, to say the least, misleading to transcribe the aspirate /b/ by /f/, if such had been intended) and of *mā’ōd* as *my’wd*; an Englishism has crept in among the Greek terms: ψυχή is rendered as *sāykah* (cf., possibly, ’ysšws for ισχύς). A further modern Anglicism is *al-Isrā’īlyiīn* instead of *banī Isrā’īl* in *Joshua* (all quotations on p. 6)

²² Cf. also the letter’s persistent, all too convenient treatment of the Koranic command of fear of God (*taqwā*) as identical to the Deuteronomist commandment of love of God—not to mention the subsequent elaboration of these concepts in the respective traditions.

refusal of analogous efforts concerning Koranic Arabic; it is hard not to see here a reflex of centuries-old Islamic controversy and polemic opposing the unabridged, direct divine word in the Koran to the merely human—even when not considered falsified—production of the Jewish and Christian scriptures.²³

The *way of God* as mentioned in verse 38—Paret translates: [fight] for God’s sake—appears particularly fitting in a document which sees itself as an invitation to dialogue. Once again—and in addition to Koranic parallels,²⁴—aṭ-Ṭabarī provides evidence in support of Paret’s and following him, our own interpretation of ‘the way of God’. In aṭ-Ṭabarī’s reading, the verse under discussion relates to Mohammed’s campaign, in the summer of 9/630, against the Byzantines of Tabūk, who consequently in his paraphrase figure as God’s enemies.²⁵ Also the threat of divine retribution for refusing to heed the call to Jihād does not seem to agree all too well with the signatories’ professedly pacific intentions.

Yet a note consonant with such overtones is sounded by the, at first glance surprising, allusion to wars of aggression against Muslims for purely religious motives:

As Muslims, we say to Christians that we are not against them and that Islam is not against them—so long as they do not wage war against Muslims on account of their religion, oppress them and drive them out of their homes.²⁶

Especially brief texts which by necessity are selective in their treatment, even of vital points, may be supposed to assign special importance and urgency to those subjects they do address. The just-quoted passage raises a number of questions, first that of the validity of such collective attributions and further those of positing religion as an independent variable in violent conflicts and of the concrete cases of Christian aggression against Muslims simply on grounds of religion. By no means is it intended here to deny cases of individual or collective violence perpetrated against Muslims or other non-Christians qua non-Christians in the name of Christianity; to the contrary, Christians—and indeed, all people of good will—should feel revulsion at such scandal and do their utmost to stop such criminal acts. Yet it is just as evident that in societal or political conflicts, religion hardly ever functions independently of other factors; also, inter-group conflicts are dynamic processes and bound to take on religious coloring—if for no other reason than simply because of the constitutive function of religion in shaping and stabilizing individual and collective identities.

At any rate, the letter maintains a rather audible silence about self-declared Islamic terrorism; only in the concluding, dramatically articulated appeal for peace unnamed advocates of conflict and destruction for the sake of egotistic impulses and material profit are reminded that gambling away interreligious peace jeopardizes ‘our immortal souls’ as well. But this pious turn may just as well be addressed to non-Muslims who are identified as anti-Muslim

²³ As for the accusation of distortion (*tahrīf*), which in the Koran (II 75, IV 46, V 13, 41) appears to refer to intentionally misleading exegesis rather than to outright forgeries, cf. aṭ-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of sura IX 34 at X 117:12, where precisely the charge is that of distorting interpolation into existent scriptures.

²⁴ This is not to deny that even in sura IX, *sabīl Allāh* may denote non-belligose activities (cf. aṭ-Ṭabarī X 117:9-14, 118:1-2, *re* IX 34); yet, however many *dates are carried to Hajar* by restating it one more time, in many passages ‘the way of God’ unequivocally refers to armed conflict (see Hanna E. Kassis, *A concordance of the Qur’an*, Berkeley, etc.: California UP 1983, pp. 1054-58, *s.v.* sabīl)

²⁵ aṭ-Ṭabarī, *ibid.*, p. 133:2-10

²⁶ The sentence with a parenthesis: ‘in accordance with the verse of the Holy Qur’an (*al-Mumtaḥina*, 60:8) quoted above’

aggressors as against al-Qā'ida and related groups.²⁷ Taken together, the diverse arguments which the letter develops present a notable, less than reassuring imbalance.

Now to freedom of religion, an issue whose treatment in the letter, as briefly stated above, merits close scrutiny. A paraphrase of sura LX 8 was also given before, in the context of Christian anti-Muslim aggression; here the letter's English translation of it may introduce a more detailed examination of the problem:

God forbiddeth you not those who warred not against you on account of religion and drove you not out from your homes, that ye should show them kindness and deal justly with them. Lo! God loveth the just dealers.

The quotation concludes an argument which, again citing the previously adduced verse III 64, resumes the invitation to "Come to a common word" extended to "the Christians (and the Jews—the people of the scripture)."²⁸ The 'Word' which is the subject of the invitation and which Paret not without reservation translates as 'word of equitable balance' (*Wort des Ausgleichs*),²⁹ is an ostensibly impartial criterion, as alluded to before. In footnote 22, following aṭ-Ṭabarī's grammatical authorities, the letter proffers 'just' ('*ādil*) or 'fair' (*munṣif*) in explanation of the clearly unusual *sawā'* as an attribute of *kalima*;³⁰ preceding his reference to grammarians, aṭ-Ṭabarī himself suggests '*adl* (balance or equilibrium),'³¹ which may appear to be a trifling difference, but to the letter's authors, does not seem to have adequately expressed their emphasis on and demand of, 'justice'. Yet before turning to the topic of 'justice', the clause 'that none of us shall take others for lords beside God' has to be taken up again, this being the phrase which occasioned the reference to aṭ-Ṭabarī in the first place. Above, the letter's paraphrasing abridgment of the quotation was qualified as distorting and misleading for it conveniently irons out potential obstacles to 'dialogue'; the letter reads 'that none of us should obey them in disobedience to what God has commanded, nor glorify them by prostrating to them in the same way as they prostrate to God—exalted is He'.³² But even this literal quotation is not immune to distorting twists since there has never been agreement on what constitutes God's command (*amr Allāh*) and what does its infringement in disputed cases. The principle of monotheism does not contribute to non-violent conflict resolution even if the three concerned religions do agree on it. Nor has, in past or present, the obligation to the 'neighbor' (*jār*: [protected] neighbor, or *akh*: brother) been immune to abuse. What is

²⁷ The use of the Koranic term 'predilections' (*min aḡli ahwā'ihim*) rather suggests non-Muslims (cf. Kassis, *Concordance*, p. 503f, q.v.).

²⁸ For aṭ-Ṭabarī (III 301:1) the verse's apostrophe of 'the people of scripture' quite simply translates into 'people of at-Taurāh and al-Injīl'; clearly he does not feel the letter's need to differentiate between the two communities by relegating one to a superadded parenthesis.

²⁹ *ta'ālaw ilā kalimatīn sawā'in*

³⁰ In aṭ-Ṭabarī (III 303:-8), I only read '*adl wa-naṣaf*'; should the letter's rendering reflect modern usage (or indeed some ulterior motive) in turning the uncommon apposition into a regular adjectival attribute?

³¹ *ibid.* 302:1, 303:-6

³² *ibid.*, 304:9-12; in the interest of transparency, the entire passage, with the letter's cuts restored, may be translated here: As for his word 'and that we not take each other for lords' [aṭ-Ṭabarī omits 'apart from God'], 'to take each other' is what takes place in liege men's obedience to their lords with respect to acts of disobedience to God which they command them to do, and with respect to the lack of that obedience to God which they forbid them to abide by—just as He—magnified be His praise—says: 'They have taken their teachers [Arberry: rabbis] and monks as lords apart from God, and al-Masīh, Mary's son—and they were commanded to serve but One God...' (thus far aṭ-Ṭabarī quotes IX 31).

at issue, is not the shared commitment to monotheism or other noble principles, whether their authority be grounded in divine or human, reasonable agency; rather it is the strictly non-violent recognition of and respect for, the actually existent other, whether mono-, poly-, or atheist (or agnostic).

At this point, the letter continues with an audacious turnabout:

In other words, that Muslims, Christians and Jews should be free to each follow what God commanded them, and not have ‘to prostrate before kings and the like’;³³ for God says elsewhere in the Holy Qur’an: *Let there be no compulsion in religion.... (Al-Baqarah, 2:256)*. This clearly relates to the Second Commandment and to love of the neighbour of which justice³⁴ and freedom of religion are a crucial part.³⁵ God says in the Holy Qur’an: *God forbiddeth you not* (continuation as quoted above).

Here we are confronted with a commonplace in modern(ist) Koran interpretation, the assertion that freedom of religion were a Koranic command and had ever since been recognized in Islam. For the sake of faithful quotation, the letter’s incorrect translation of the quoted part of sura II 256 has here been reproduced; it should read: No compulsion is there in religion (Paret adds in parenthesis: i.e. nobody can be compelled to believe [rightly]) as the continuation immediately clarifies: Rectitude has become clear from error (again with Paret’s annotation: through the preaching of Islam so that it clearly stands out from the errancy of pagan disbelief). So whosoever disbelieves in idols and believes in God, has laid hold of the most firm handle, unbreaking; God is All-hearing-All-knowing.

Here as elsewhere, it is worth consulting, in addition to the Koranic wording, aṭ-Ṭabarī’s exegesis, which, as we saw, the letter’s authors themselves at times refer to. According to him, non-compulsion holds only for ‘the people of the two scriptures and the Majūs (Zoroastrians)’, against their paying the poll-tax; in other words, it is granted only to those adherents of ‘false religions’ who are granted the privilege of being taxed in return for their submission to the rule of Islam. This did not apply to idolaters among the Arab polytheists or apostates and their like who forfeit their lives if they refuse conversion. Further, ‘in religion’ in this verse means ‘in Islam’ to aṭ-Ṭabarī; he goes so far as to take the definite article here as synonymous to the possessive and thus, to join directly the beginning of the verse to the preceding clause, which yields: He is the All-high, the All-glorious in whose religion there is no compulsion.

Given the importance of freedom of religion in contemporary human-rights discourse and the widespread temptation to bend the interpretation of sura II 256 to situational convenience, it may not be amiss to cite the witness of a few more exegetes, without any attempt at completeness. Roughly three centuries after aṭ-Ṭabarī, Fakhr ad-Dīn ar-Rāzī in his great commentary³⁶ suggests the same reading of the definite article in *ad-dīn*; however, in his view, an interpretation which he quotes on Abū Muslim’s³⁷ and al-Qaffāl’s authority,³⁸

³³ Here the letter has a footnote with the reference to aṭ-Ṭabarī (see above)

³⁴ This is the place of the above-mentioned fn. 22, in which the ‘equitable criterion’ is glossed as ‘just’ and ‘fair’. The modern Arabic term *‘adāla* (‘justice’) suddenly intimates a contemporary conceptual frame of reference. Obviously, the authors’ concept of justice also wants explication.

³⁵ Here, the English formulation *a crucial part* again illustrates the priority of the English to the Arabic version.

³⁶ *at-Taḥfīr al-kabīr*, 32 parts in 16 vols., Cairo: al-Maṭba‘a al-bahīya al-miṣrīya 1357/1938, VII 15:9 – 16:8

³⁷ Muḥammad b. Bakr al-Iṣfahānī (d. 322/934), a mu‘tazilite and author of a multi-volume commentary on the Koran (GAL S I 334, no. 3f)

³⁸ Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. Aḥmad ash-Shāshī (d. 507/1113), a shāfi‘ite legal author

appears much more important: belief by compulsion would detract from the character of this life as the place of trial and tribulation; as clarified in the continuation of the verse, belief and unbelief had become patently distinguishable so that the obstinate unbeliever had forfeited any claim to the benefit of the doubt. If he were compelled to belief, he would be rid of his duty to conform to the divine command. Among the scriptural testimony adduced, sura X (Yūnus), v. 99, is quoted: And if thy Lord had willed, whoever is in the earth would have believed, all of them, all together. Wouldst thou then constrain the people, until they are believers?³⁹ For Ibn Kathīr, significantly, God is the agent in man's pledging belief rather than man himself; whomever God grants insight, holds that those not so favored by God will not benefit even from forcible conversion.⁴⁰

The fact remains that the Koranic witness does not proclaim freedom of religion⁴¹ as the letter's authors aver; if they had been aware of it and yet wanted to uphold their own exegesis it would have been incumbent on them to argue their case openly. On the other hand, the less than stringent combination of III 64 with II 256 and further, with the contemporary concept of 'freedom of religion'⁴² permits of an alternative, rather ominous inference; then, for the people of scripture non-compulsion would merely consist of their 'freedom' to adopt, in contradiction to inherited Jewish or Christian doctrines, a monotheism in conformity to the Koranic definition. After all, beginning with traditional exegesis, 'religion' in II 256 does not mean anything but 'true religion', i.e. Islam.⁴³

Should, on the other hand, the letter indeed mean to support freedom of religion by present-day definition, a linguistically correct reading of II 256, as indicated above with reference to Paret, could still be productively applied to Muslim human rights discourse; thus the actual, even divinely ordained non-enforceability of religious belief leads Mohamed Talbi to a comprehensive definition of freedom of religion which is consonant with international human rights concepts and laws.⁴⁴ Since like all liberties this one is indivisible, it cannot be restricted to monotheistic religions, not even to religious creeds as such, but has to encompass

³⁹ Previously and as a matter of course, az-Zamakhsharī had referred to X 99 as well in his interpretation of the passage as *de-*, rather than *prescriptive* (*al-Kashshāf*, Cairo: al-Maṭba 'a ash-sharāfiya 1307/1890, I 121:-14ff). – In the following, ar-Rāzī also cites the interpretation which restricts the freedom from compulsion to Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians as long as they pay the poll-tax. In contrast to aṭ-Ṭabarī, he also discusses the question of whether unbelievers are under duress permitted to convert to Judaism or Christianity rather than to Islam, as well as the opinion that conversion to Islam in the wake of conquest does not count as compulsory as long as orthopraxy obtains. This latter view highlights the question of the legitimacy of military means in the diffusion of the faith in addition to the expansion of Muslim rule (cf. Patricia Crone, *God's rule: government and Islam*, New York: Columbia UP 2004, esp. pp. 369-85).

⁴⁰ I 318:15-17

⁴¹ *ḥurrīyat ad-dīn*: freedom of religion (p. 9)

⁴² see the preceding note.!

⁴³ As for the combination of ostensible respect for the conscience of the individual with aggressive *jihādism* (*avant la lettre*) – of course, without regard to historical circumstances – cf. Sayyid Quṭb's commentary *in locum* in *Fī zilāl al-Qur'ān*,⁸ Cairo: Dār ash-Shurūq 1399/1979, I 290:-6 – 296:10

⁴⁴ Mohamed Talbi, "Religious Liberty: a Muslim Perspective," in Swidler, Leonard, ed., *Religious Liberty and Human Rights in Nations and Religions*, Philadelphia: Ecumenical Press, and New York: Hippocrene Books 1986, pp. 175-87, esp. p. 182; cf. Lutz Richter-Bernburg, "Rivalisierende Universalismen. Islamisches Religionsgesetz und säkularer Humanismus," in: Peter Pawelka & Lutz Richter-Bernburg, eds., *Religion, Kultur und Politik im Vorderen Orient*, Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften 2004, pp. 107-20, esp. p. 116f.

atheistic and agnostic persuasions as well, with the principle of reciprocity binding for every one.

To the neglect of a host of other issues raised by the Open Letter of 138 Muslims, the foregoing paper has focussed on the internal coherence of the argument the letter constructs on the basis of diverse Koranic testimony. Such coherence has proved elusive, not least because the verse taken for its programmatic heading, *A Common Word Between Us and You* or in our approximation, ‘a word of equitable balance’ is liable to invalidate the letter’s stated purpose. As we have seen, the letter’s Koranic criterion is unbalanced—not ‘common’ at all—and the adopted exegetical method unsound because opportunistic and ignoring well-established alternative methods. Beyond the letter’s frame of reference, the result is negative as well; the search for a shared religious principle even if successful is futile in ensuring interreligious peace and cooperation. Peace will have to be achieved not between ‘principles’ but between concrete individuals and groups. The letter’s pacific intent is to be welcomed, but in order for it to come to fruition, it may, figuratively speaking, well need an Archimedean lever.

It is high time Boccaccio’s and Lessing’s parable of the three rings were rescued from oblivion.