

QUR'AN-GOSPEL CONVERGENCE: THE QUR'AN'S MESSAGE TO CHRISTIANS

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1. Introduction

Pope John Paul II said while addressing over 80,000 Muslims at a soccer stadium in Casablanca in 1985,

We believe in the same God, the one God, the Living God who created the world ... In a world which desires unity and peace, but experiences a thousand tensions and conflicts, should not believers come together? Dialogue between Christians and Muslims is today more urgent than ever. It flows from fidelity to God. Too often in the past, we have opposed each other in polemics and wars. I believe that today God invites us to change old practices. We must respect each other and we must stimulate each other in good works on the path to righteousness.

The world continues to look forward expectantly to all religious scholars especially the Christian theologians to clear up the prevailing environment further for more fruitful dialogue between all religions. Followers of many religions believe that their respective Holy Books contain “Word of God” or spiritual food that is capable of transforming the errant humans into righteous and compassionate beings. When we glance through the contents of the Holy Books of various religions, we get the impression that each of them is quite divergent from the other. However after a deeper contemplative analysis, a spiritual seeker may arrive at the conclusion that the ultimate teachings of all Holy Books tend to converge. They all demand humans to establish universal brotherhood and to experience “oneness” with the eternal Spirit by progressively purging the sinful tendencies and by restraining and dovetailing the activities of the senses, mind and body with the perceived will of God.

One who has “surrendered fully to the will of God” in the above manner is called “Muslim” in the Qur’an. If the spiritual practitioners and

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mystics of all religions who have succeeded in meeting a similar objective and are led by the Spirit of God happen to engage in a spiritual dialogue, they are likely to share the perception that there is convergence in the essence of all Holy Books. Indeed the world will become an ideal place to live in, if the believers of all Holy Books recognize jointly that the same Spirit has independently guided and brought them all up with the intention of uniting them spiritually in the fullness of time without destroying their cherished identities.

After conducting a spiritual pilgrimage into the Qur'an, the author, who is a Christian layman, became convinced that the Qur'an is compatible with the Gospels and felt that it intends to convey certain messages to the Christians. In the Qur'an, there are innumerable direct and indirect references to the Gospels, Jesus, Mary and the early Christians. This article is based on such references in the Qur'an and it attempts a fresh re-interpretation of the Qur'an as well as the Gospels. It is admitted that the exegesis attempted here may not coincide with the conventional exegesis practiced by the average Muslims and Christians. This article is intended as one humble step towards dispelling the discordance existing between these Abrahamic streams and to unite them spiritually.

2. References in the Qur'an Pertaining to Christianity

The Qur'an says that the "Inchil" (Gospels) confirms the earlier Holy Books and that it contains true guidance and light (5:46-47). The "Torah" (Holy Book revealed through Moses) is presented as complete guidance in the Qur'an (6:154; 5:44). The Qur'an confirms all the previous prophets and Holy Books without any distinction (3:3,84; 2:285; 10:37). According to the Qur'an, no Holy Books are contradictory or conflicting among themselves. The source book for all Holy Books (*Ummul Kitaab*) is retained by "Allah" or the eternal Spirit (13:38, 39; 2:106). It is up to Him to renew or retain the once-given guidance in the fullness of time. Message of the Qur'an is contained in the "*Ummul Kitaab*" (43:1-4). The Word of God in the Qur'an is contained in the earlier Holy Books (26:192-196). There is nothing fundamentally new or different in the Qur'an. It has been revealed in plain Arabic especially for the clear understanding of Arabic speaking communities so that they do not have a chance now to complain about the lack of prophetic guidance in comparison to other communities (41:43-44; 28:47,48; 6:156-158; 26:195,196; 13:37; 3:164; 12:1-3). The Qur'an entreats Muslims to believe not only in the Qur'an but also in all Holy Books, which were revealed earlier (4:136).

The Qur'an proclaims the following Gospel truths: Virginity of Mary, breathing of Holy Spirit into her womb resulting in the manifestation of “the Word” through her, her purified status and complete submission to God (66:12) and her position as the highest among all the women of the world. It also refers to how Mary received “the Word” who was called Jesus, the holy or sinless (*zakiyya*) birth of Jesus, his role as the Messiah (*Al-Masih*), the exalted position of Jesus in this world and life hereafter, his supernatural powers such as giving life even to inanimate objects, raising the dead to life, his resurrection to the Father, the mistake of Israelites in not believing Jesus, elevation of the followers of Jesus above those who disbelieved in him till the end of times when all communities will be brought together by God etc. (3:33-56; 61:14, 19:16-34, 21:91). The Qur'an portrays Jesus the son of Mary as an exalted prophet (2:253) and as a perfect model for mankind (23:50). It does not acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God. It denies divinity to him (5:17-19). It strongly denies the notion that the eternal Spirit has partners (2:116; 4:116; 9:30-31; 43:57-65, 81-84). Hence the Christian interpretation of the Holy Trinity where Jesus the son of Mary is treated as an equal partner of the eternal Spirit or Father is severely criticized by the Qur'an (5:72-77, 116). There is apparent contradiction between the Gospels and the Qur'an regarding the question of crucifixion and death of Jesus. The Qur'an says that Jesus was not crucified and killed by the Jews. It only appeared so unto them (4:157).

The Qur'an confirms the validity and compatibility of the earlier Holy Books like the Gospels and the Torah and asks its followers in unambiguous terms to believe in all of them without any distinction. It teaches that there is only one God and that He has not left any community without divine guidance. The followers of all Holy Books are worshipping the same God through stipulated ways and means. It indicates that the essence of all Holy Books is the same and that it is none other than the exhortation for “absolute submission to the will of God” (Islam). It admits that the evil-doers or ordinary followers (non-believers / *kafirs*) of other Holy Books may not recognize the truth of the Qur'an whereas the true “believers” or real-life practitioners among them will recognize that the Light of the Qur'an is the same as the Light contained in their own respective Holy Books. As per the Qur'an such enlightened people deserve heavenly reward twice. The Qur'an says that they may not opt for switching over to Islam, since they know that they are already established in a safe sanctuary.

In short, the Qur'an tries to impress upon mankind that there is only one God who deserves to be worshipped and that "Islam" is the only true religion. It praises the "believers" or the real-life practitioners of absolute submission ("Islam") among all the religious communities of the world. Through criticism it seeks to reform the lost sheep or the errant followers (*kafirs*) among them. It criticizes the errant Christians for their unrighteousness and for holding dogmas that are not compatible with the monotheistic concept of the Gospels. It asks Christians to base their interpretations and judgments on the revelations in the Gospels. However, the literal interpretation of a few messages in the Qur'an is offensive to the average Christians and the prominent among them need to be examined carefully.

3. Reflections on the Messages that are Offensive to the Christians

It has to be re-emphasized that the Qur'an does not criticize the Gospels or other Holy Books in any way. "The People of the Book" are criticized throughout the Qur'an for killing the messengers of God, for not remaining faithful to their respective Holy Books, for misinterpreting the revelation received by them and for their unrighteousness. The messages in the Qur'an regarding the negation of divinity of Jesus and the conflicting view about the death of Jesus are the two major factors that appear contradictory to the Gospels. Hence the average Christians, who explore the Qur'an through literal interpretation, consider it as erroneous and do not treat the Qur'an as true revelation or Word of God. The average Muslims, who explore the Gospels, respect Jesus as an exalted prophet through whom God spoke and are ready to equate him and his words with Word of God. However they think that the account of his life and words as recorded by his disciples are not divinely inspired and that they cannot be equated with the Word of God. Many of them believe that what Christians consider to be the Gospels is its corrupted version and that Christians are making a mistake by equating Jesus with the eternal Spirit and by worshipping him.

Jesus himself criticized the Jewish authorities severely for their mistakes. He antagonized the scribes and Pharisees by exposing their hypocrisy and by criticizing the vainness of their external or physical worship (Mt 15:7-9; 23:27). He criticized the Pharisees who failed to develop a compassionate attitude despite being meticulous in practicing the ritualistic content of their Holy Book (Luke 11:42). He remarked that they were not eligible for the kingdom of heaven (Mt 5:20) and that they

were unfit for occupying the chairs of the religious institution (Luke 11:43-46f). He criticized those who were supposed to be guides of the people for posing obstacles in the spiritual progress of the people by misguiding them and by persecuting the prophets who came to reform them (Luke 11:47-52).

Most of the scribes and Pharisees thought that the words and deeds of Jesus contradicted their Holy Book, while in fact they confirmed it (Mt 5:17-18). Taking pride that they were chosen and ordained by God, and thinking that they had the duty of defending their faith and religious institution, they sought to destroy Jesus (Mt 12:14), who they thought was really blaspheming when He claimed to be the Son of God (Mt 26:65, John 19:7). Unaware that Jesus might be using figurative language, they took his claim in the literal sense. They did not realize that everyone is entitled to attain “Abba experience” and to become sons of God as demonstrated by Jesus. They sincerely thought that a carpenter’s son could not be the Messiah whom they were awaiting (Mt 13:55-57). Despite the public perception that Jesus was the messiah, they sought further proof (Mark 8:11-12). They failed to practice what they preached (Mt 23:2-3) and hence remained unrighteous or spiritually foolish. Jesus recognized the height of their spiritual ignorance (Luke 23:24) and warned his disciples, “...the hour is coming when those who kill you will think they are offering a service to God (John 16:2; Mt 23:34).

In contrast to the above categories, there were a few righteous or spiritually enlightened people like Simeon (Luke 2:25-35), prophetess Anna (Luke 2:36-38), Elizabeth (Luke 1:42-45) and Nathaniel (John 1:41-49) who recognized Jesus as the embodiment and fulfilment of their Holy Books. Zacchaeus, a rich and greedy tax collector accepted Jesus publicly (Luke 19:5-6). Nicodemus, a respected and scholarly Pharisee recognized Jesus as a teacher, though he had not grown spiritually wise enough to recognize the concept of being “born-again” (John 3:1-10). There were many people who longed to see the manifestation of the Word, but could not live long enough to see it (Luke 10:23-24). The three wise men belonging to some unknown spiritual traditions in the east intuited about the incarnation of Jesus, came and paid obeisance to Him and returned to their respective nations (Mt 2:1-12) while most of the world including the Jews remained in the darkness of ignorance (John 1:9-10).

Both the Qur’an and the Gospels are concerned more about the “lost sheep” or the unguided or lazy sheep, than about the sincere sheep who stay on grazing blissfully on the spiritual food or Word of God available in

their home turf without straying away. Jesus came specifically in search of the wrong doers or the unrighteous sheep (Mt 9:12-13; Mt 15:24; Mark 2:17; Luke 5:31-32; 19:10), who were not faithful to their Holy Books or the pre-incarnate form of “The Word”. He preferred to leave unattended as many people among his community who were righteous and to go after the remaining persons who had not yet recognized the need for repentance and hence remained unrighteous (Luke 15:4-7). Jesus preferred to pour new wine into new empty wineskins rather than into old wineskins that were truly faithful to the old wine (Luke 5:33-39). This approach can be seen in the Qur’an also which tries to cast its missionary net on the unrighteous among the followers of other Holy Books, whom it calls *Kafirs* or “disbelievers”. Such disbelievers or ignorant people among the People of the Book are criticized for not recognizing the truth of the Qur’an. But paradoxically, the doors are always open for such lost sheep.

The ultimate objective of the criticism in the Holy Books is to cause repentance and to instil righteousness among the targets. When this objective is forgotten by some overzealous missionaries who are themselves not reformed in the full sense, they indulge in mission mechanically and try to get quick results by imparting a skewed concept of easy salvation to the targets. The spiritual complacency and unrighteousness among some Christians can be attributed to such practices.¹ Both the Gospels and the Qur’an teach that unless a person abides by the Word of God, and submits fully to the will of God, he/ she will not be able to become righteous so as to be saved or rewarded, after their death. The Gospels declare that the criterion for assessing the worth of an individual on the Day of Judgment and to decide his fate after death will be righteousness as reflected by the acts of kindness and mercy done by people to their disadvantaged fellow men (Matthew 25:31-46).

Neither Jesus nor Prophet Muhammad came to eliminate the existing religions or to substitute them with new ones. Both confirmed the previous Holy Books. They came with powerful messages relevant for everyone including the followers of other Holy Books. They also established new covenants to perpetuate their unique messages through those who were willing to get enrolled. The doors are always open and there is no compulsion in religion. The messages remain open for all those who are willing to listen and to introspect.

¹“Why Some Christians Are Spiritually Lethargic?”, *OMNI Journal of Spiritual and Religious Care*, <http://www.omc.ca/omni/articles.html>

It is quite probable that among the present day Jews, there are open-minded people like Nicodemus and Zacchaeus, who are willing to listen to the teachings of Jesus. Those among them who accept Jesus as a Rabbi, can learn the following truths if they recognize the intention of the criticism by Jesus in the Gospels. (1) It is essential to undergo a process of crucifixion resulting in rebirth or spiritual metamorphosis in order to enter the kingdom of God (John 3:3-10). (2) Adherence to the frills of the religion is meaningful only when it is accompanied by an earnest attempt to attain righteousness and compassion (Mt 9:13; Luke 10:33-37). (3) The essence of all “Law and Prophets” is contained in the twin commandments regarding the love of God and the love of neighbour (Mt 22:36-40). (4) Love of God is a mere farce if it has not resulted in love and compassion to the fellow beings (1 John 4:20). It is up to the Jews to take the criticism of Jesus positively and concentrate more on the underlying essence of their Holy Books than on the frills of their religion.² The Jews can become better Jews if they emulate Abraham and his perfect submission to the will of God by listening to the message of “Islam” in the Qur’an.

Similarly the present day Christians should accept the criticism in the Qur’an positively and examine with an open mind whether its message can open our eyes to some sublime truths in the Gospels that we have neglected inadvertently. The criticism of the Qur’an will bear fruit if we understand the Gospels better, submit ourselves to the will of God and become bearers of righteousness, compassion and mercy by remaining faithful to the commands of Jesus.

4. Jesus, the Word

The Qur’an portrays Jesus as “the Word” (*Kalima* in Arabic) or Spirit who manifested through Mary (4:171; 3:45). He is an exalted prophet (2:253) and a perfect model for mankind (23:50; 19:19-21;). We must admit that unless he was divinely inspired like the apostle John, Prophet Muhammad could not have equated Jesus with such an abstract term as “the Word”. In the Qur’an, the name Jesus is often tagged with the adjective “son of Mary” (23:50). This distinguishes his human role from that of his divine role as “the Word”. The New Testament books also portray Jesus both as “the Word” and as a complete man (John 1:14; 1 Tim 2:5; Rom 8:3; Phil 2:7; Heb 2:14-17; 4:14-15, Col 2:9).

²“Mission Of The Incarnate Word Among The Israelites,” *Indian Journal Of Spirituality*, October-December 2007.

As projected in the prologue to the John's Gospel, the primordial Word or "the Word of God" is the agent and sustainer of creation (John 1:3; Col 1:16; 1 Pet 1:20; Heb1:2, 3). He is existent from eternity as an indivisible and inseparable part of the Ultimate Reality. He is the Alpha and Omega, the origin, sustainer and the summation of the universe (Rev 3:14; Rev 1:8; 21:6; 22:13). The Word of God is a living and immanent dynamic spiritual reality and judge (Rev 19:13) who constantly discerns even the deepest desires and thoughts of His entire creation (Heb 4:12-13). He is the "first-born" (Col 1:15-20; Heb 1:6; Rev 3:14), Son of God as well as the indweller and Lord of the universe. It is this role of the pre-incarnate Word that entitled him to be called the only begotten Son of God. In this role, he has an inseparable but specific function as the causal agent and as the indweller and soul of the visible, dynamic and living universe. The only begotten Word enlightens everyone on earth from the very beginning. In the fullness of time, he came and dwelt amongst the humans in the form of a human being (John 1:1-14) to reform them. It was not his physical birth as the son of Mary that qualified Jesus as the only Son of God, but rather his pre-existent role as the sole agent of creation and as the indweller of the universe from the beginning of creation.

Jesus presented himself to the Jews as the "Bread of life" or spiritual food that has come down from heaven (John 6:51-59). Jesus the incarnate Word, however, pre-existed as spiritual food, transcending his short historical timeframe. He had presented himself indirectly to various individuals and communities including Abraham and the Mosaic community before he assumed the human role amidst the Israelite community. The epistles unambiguously state that it was Christ who was manifested as the "spiritual drink," "spiritual food," or the "spiritual rock" to the Israelites in their spiritual wilderness (1 Cor 10:1-4). Jesus declared that he existed prior to Abraham even from the foundation of the world (John 17:5, 24) and that Abraham rejoiced in him (John 8:56-58). He demonstrated his association with Moses and Elijah (Mt 17:1-4). John the Baptist confirmed the pre-existence of Jesus (John 1:15, 30). The apostles also shared with others their joy in having heard, seen and touched the pre-existent "Word of Life" (1 John 1:1-4; 2:13). Hence we cannot deny the prerogative of the primordial Word who is the only begotten Son of God to manifest and exist within and outside the Christian revelation³ especially

³"Indirect Presence of "The Word" in Other Religions," *SEDOS Bulletin*, Sept-Oct 2006, <http://www.sedos.org/2007>.

in the form of Holy Books or spiritual food. Here we are reminded of the concept of “*Ummul Kitaab*” in the Qur’an which indicates that the source of all Holy Books is the same. We may also note that Jesus the incarnate Word is projected as the repository of wisdom (1 Cor 1:24; Col 2:2-3).

The Word of God provides baby food to the spiritual novices and solid food to the grown-ups (1 Pet 2:2, 1 Cor 3:1-3; Heb 5:12-14). Spiritual food, after getting digested, manifests as wisdom. Wisdom is also compared to food and wine (Prov 9:1-5). The Bible projects wisdom as the most precious gift of Spirit, to be sought at all costs, so as to face the world and to know God (Prov 16:16; 4:5-7; 5:1-3; 1 Cor 12:8; Luke 21:15; Eph 1:17). Wisdom is personified (Prov 8:11-12) and identified as the First-born, who came into being before the universe, as the agent of creation. Wisdom was by the side of God as the master craftsman, while the foundation of the universe was being laid (Prov 3:19; 8:12, 22, 26, 30; Psalm 104:24). The attributes of wisdom (1) as the first-born, (2) as the sole agent of creation and (3) as spiritual food correlates well with the role of the pre-existent Word.

Jesus occasionally talked in first person indicating his pre-incarnate role and the unique glory he shared with the Father before the creation of the universe (John 17:5, 24). He came from the Father and returned to Him after completing his mission (John 6:28). (1) While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them, “What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?” “The son of David,” they replied. He said to them, “How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him ‘Lord’?.....If then David calls him ‘Lord,’ how can he be his son?” (Mt 22:41-46).

(2) I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man (John 3:12-13).

(3) But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins....” He said to the paralyzed man, “I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home.” (Luke 5:2).

(4) “All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows who the Son is except the Father, and no one knows who the Father is except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.” Then he turned to his disciples and said privately, “Blessed are the eyes that see what you see. For I tell you that many prophets and kings wanted to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.” (Luke 10:22-24).

(5) And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Luke 22:29-30).

(6) I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd (John 10:16).

The above utterances are expressive of the divine role of Jesus, beyond that of the prophetic role amidst the Israelites. But the following utterances of Jesus are not merely expressive of his divine role, but are uttered by Jesus from a different perspective. While uttering these words, Jesus represented the eternal “Word of God”, who is the agent of creation and the light of the world from the very beginning (John 1: 9).

(1) “I tell you the truth,” Jesus answered, “before Abraham was born, I am!” (John 8:58).

(2) But he continued, “You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world (John 8:23).

(3) When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life (John 8:12).

(4) I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture (John 10:9).

(5) Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me (John 14:16).

If we treat these words to be emanating from Jesus in his human prophetic role, then it makes Christianity the only way to salvation. If we concede that these words, though spoken by Jesus, are emanating from the eternal “Word of God”, then we move on to inclusivism from exclusivism, where we acknowledge the larger role and prerogative of the eternal Word in reforming the human race through different forms of spiritual food, Holy Books or wines.

5. Jesus, the Man

Jesus had the primary duty of giving one more call for repentance to the lost sheep of Israel, who were already fed on the old wine of Judaism. He had the secondary duty of creating a new set of followers through the new wine of Christianity. Those who drink the new wine would go out and spread his message, acting as the salt of the earth and illuminating all others who are still searching for the light (John 1:5-10; Mt 5:13-16). As long as he was in the world carrying out the work entrusted by the Father,

he remained as a pure human being with all its consequent limitations except sinful nature. During this period he demonstrated how a human could remain in total spiritual communion with the Father through absolute submission to His will (Islam). He became the unique model in the world who not only claimed “oneness” with the Father (John 10:30), but also demonstrated his “Abba Experience” from cradle to death.

As a pure human being and as a servant of God (Mt 12:18; Mt 17:4, 11, 13), Jesus had to carry out the above duties and in addition he had to fulfil the extremely complex duty of representing and symbolizing the Eternal Word of God among the human species. This clarifies the intent of his utterances pointing to his pre-existence, though it perplexed and scandalized his fellow Jews to the extent of picking up stones to stone him (John 8:58-59). The following passage in the John’s Gospel reveals that according to the Israelites, the Saviour or Christ whom they were expecting all along was an eternal divine personality as per the scriptural prophecies. The crowd spoke up, “We have heard from the Law that the Christ will remain forever, so how can you say, ‘The Son of Man must be lifted up’? Who is this ‘Son of Man’?” (John 12:34). The Israelites expected the Christ to be an all powerful entity like a king who would rule them forever (Acts 2:30; Isaiah 9:6-7). They were confused when Jesus indicated that he will not meet their expectations, on account of his pure and simple human role.

On several occasions Jesus highlighted the natural limitations of his human role in order to convey a powerful message to us. He was subject to temptations or hunger (Mt 4:2). He said that He could do nothing on his own (John 5:30) and that only the Father in heaven knows the time when the world will get renewed (Mt 24:36). He experienced extreme agony and prayed to the Heavenly Father for removing the cup of crucifixion at Gethsemane. He felt weak in flesh (Mt 26:38, 39, 41). He felt forsaken (Mt 27:46). Though he claimed “oneness” with the Father in a figurative sense, he did not count himself equal to the Father in heaven (John 14:28) in his embodied state. This apparent contradiction in his words disappears only when we delineate his two different roles as (1) the pre-existent Word and (2) the incarnate Word.

We can see that the Word humbled Himself (Phil 2:6-8) and lowered Himself to the level of a human (John 1:14) and subjected himself to all physical laws of nature such as temptation, hunger, agony etc. (Heb 2:14-18; 4:15; 5:7-10; 12:2; Rom 1:3,4; Luke 4:2 etc.). He also submitted himself to “the Law” (Gal 4:4). This descent from Spirit to flesh (or *Amr*

to *Khalq* in Arabic) was intended to reveal the Father to the world (John 17:1-8; 1:18). Jesus functions as a perfect mirror in the world reflecting the image and nature of the Father. Those who merely hold the mirror mechanically in their hand do not see the Father. Those who have oriented themselves properly and have clearly discerned the true nature of Jesus with their inner eyes have indeed seen the Father (John 14:9).

Through His descent amongst the Israelites in the highly limited form of a human being, the Word offered himself “again” to the Jews and the world as “Light” or spiritual food in order to reform and redirect the unrighteous people among the Israelites and other communities who had lost their way and had become spiritually sick and unrepentant (Mt 15:24; 9:12-13). Perhaps the spiritual guidance or Holy Books that have been revealed to various religious communities are different forms of the same Word of God. The concept of “Word of God” is the unifying key or “attractor” on which all religious traditions are likely to converge at the end of times, when the message of Christ is preached to all nations. By representing “the Word” in the entire world, Jesus became the central figure on which all religions can converge through the concept of “Wider Ecumenism”, without the need for discarding their independent identities.

Jesus served as a model for mankind and sacrificed his life to bring mankind to a sinless New World. He taught us that we too should attempt “Abba experience” or “oneness” with the Father by emulating the way of the cross in our daily lives (Mt 10:38; 16:24; John 17:21-24). The Qur’an reiterates that Jesus was fully aware about his mission and the will of God, no sooner than he was born (19:29-34). As a human being, Jesus sought the will of the Father perfectly and executed it in full compliance without any deviation during his life from cradle to death and resurrection (John 6:38; 5:30; 8:29; 17:4; Mt 26:39). The miracles done by Jesus were possible due to his communion with the Father through the Holy Spirit (Luke 3:22; 4:1,14; John 5:19-21; 10:30-38; 14:9-11; Qur’an 5:110; 2:87,253). As a human, it was necessary for Jesus to seek the Father’s help in protecting himself from temptations, and in doing miracles (John 10:25; 14:31). We too can do the miracles similar to the way Jesus did (John 14:12), if we have proper faith and are one with God or led by the Spirit of God. The gift of Holy Spirit is available to all those who obey the Word of God (Acts 5:32) and seek it fervently from the Father (Luke 11:13).

The Qur’an probably objects to the belief of the average Christians who treat the son of Mary and the Father in Heaven to be equals or partners. By metaphorically claiming to be the Son of God, Jesus intended

to proclaim and demonstrate the spiritual communion or “oneness” he enjoyed with the Father while remaining as a human being. He expects his followers also to attempt the same. The Word came down to the earth to demonstrate how everyone can become sons of God, and his human role was not a farce. Though He was divine in a transcendental sense in the role of “the Word”, He humbled himself while assuming the human role as son of Mary. He became a real man, and demonstrated how to experience communion with the Father and to become partakers of divine nature (2 Pet 1:4). Jesus wants everyone to attain the son-ship of God by (1) subjugating the sinful tendencies and sanctifying the body, (2) by dovetailing the mind with the will of God and (3) by attempting Abba experience (Rom 8:13-17,29; Gal 3:26-27, 4:6-7; Heb 2:11).

Though he accepted worship from his followers (Mt 14:33; 28:9-10, 16-17), he told them that there is only one God, the Father in heaven (Mt 23:9). He neither demanded worship nor encouraged it. He claimed only the position of a teacher and Lord (Mt 23:10). But he knew that God sanctions certain weaknesses of humans (Mark 10:15). Recognizing the perennial urge of humans to worship a form, he gave-in to the worship offered by his followers, but he foresaw an age where true worshippers would worship the formless God in spirit and truth (John 4:23-24). He declared that God is Spirit and that those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.

Jesus had two roles, one as the incarnate Word in the human form, and the other as the eternal Word which he represented amongst the human race, while remaining as a pure human being. While interpreting the words of Jesus, we have to appropriately judge whether he has spoken them in his human role as a teacher or in his role as “the eternal Word”. The following utterances of Jesus are attributable to his human role. These selected verses indicate that in his embodied state, he did not claim equality with the Father and that he expressed some weaknesses that are common to normal human beings.

(1) By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me (John 5:30).

(2) No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father (Mt 24:36).

(3) “You heard me say, ‘I am going away and I am coming back to you.’ If you loved me, you would be glad that I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I (John 14:28).

(4) Then he said to them, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak” (Mt 26:38-41).

(5) About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*”—which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mt 27:46).

Most of the utterances of Jesus belong to the first phase of his ministry which he devoted to the reformation of the Israelites within their existing tradition. This phase spans from the start of his public ministry until his last supper. During this phase, he tried to exclude others from his mission, since Christianity was yet to be instituted. This role was similar to that of the long line of prophets up to John the Baptist. Jesus exhorted the people to abide not by the letter, but by the spirit of “The Law and the Prophets”. He taught that for entering the Kingdom of Heaven, it was necessary to attain a level of righteousness, surpassing that of the scribes and Pharisees. Adherence to the Mosaic commands was prescribed. During this phase of his ministry, he and his disciples baptized the Israelites into repentance and reformed them within Judaism, even while John the Baptist was doing the same (John 3:22-24; 4:1; John 1:25). Following are some examples of the utterances of Jesus during the first phase of his ministry.

(1) These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel (Mathew 10:5-6).

(2) “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.” The woman came and knelt before him. “Lord, help me!” she said. He replied, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to their dogs” (Mt 15:24-26).

(3) The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach (Mt 23:2-3).

(4) So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets (Mt 7:12)

(5) Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. “I am willing,” he said. “Be clean!” Immediately he was cured of his leprosy. Then Jesus said to him, “See that you don’t tell anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift Moses commanded, as a testimony to them” (Mt 8:3-4).

(6) “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven (Mt 5:17-20).

The first phase of the ministry of Jesus extended up to the Last Supper. All the Jews who were reformed and baptized by Jesus and his disciples up to this point remained within Judaism. Only some scribes and Pharisees and their followers discarded his message. Even today the way of life and the spoken words of Jesus from the beginning of his ministry up to the last supper is capable of reforming the followers of the old wine of Judaism, provided they are ready to accept Jesus as a Rabbi.

Jesus inaugurated the second phase of his ministry by establishing the covenant of Christianity through the Eucharistic celebration, and by this act, he targeted the lost sheep or the unrighteous ones among the whole of humanity. The message of Christ addressed to the followers of Judaism and criticizing them gives an opportunity for the followers of various religions to examine whether they are in the right track or not. It also beckons those who are attracted by the message to become Christians.

Jesus started his universal role beyond the Israelite community by commissioning his disciples to take his message to all nations beginning at Jerusalem, from the day of his resurrection. Until his ascension, he continued the second phase of his human role as a guide and teacher among his disciples, preparing them for the “Great Commission.” This phase of the ministry of Jesus which started after his resurrection is expected to continue until the message of Christ is preached to all nations by his followers. Following are some typical utterances that express his human role during the second phase.

(1) Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, “This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father

has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:45-49).

(2) When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, “Do you have anything here to eat?” They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence (Luke 41:43).

(3) He said, “Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.” When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish (John 21:6).

(4) He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation (Mark 16:15).

(5) Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Mt 28:18-20).

We may interpret that the second phase of the ministry of Jesus will come to an end when the message of Christ has been preached to all nations (Mt 24:14). We seem to have been successful in taking the message of Jesus across the globe, especially in this age, due to the advancement in mass communications. But we may not have been so successful in practicing what we preach and to attract others to Christianity. All prophecies point to a third phase of the ministry of Jesus, called the Second Coming of Jesus, where it is the “The Word of God” that is going to reign over the world (Rev 11:15, 19:11-16).

6. The Divine and Human Roles of Jesus

The average Christians usually mix up the human and divine roles of Jesus and presume that Jesus did all the miracles due to his inherent divinity. We normally refuse to believe that it is possible for humans to emulate his Abba experience. We tend to ignore his unique role among the Israelites as a man of God and as a reformer who maintained constant spiritual communion or “oneness” with the Father through absolute submission to the will of God or “Islam”. The average Christians are used to seeing Jesus on the pedestal. It is high time that we start seeing Jesus on the ground also as a role model for us to emulate, even while we worship him. If we fail to recognize the seriousness and significance of the human role performed by Jesus on earth, and do not attempt to emulate him, then we make a serious

mistake. The Qur’an seems to be pointing to this reality by ostensibly questioning the divinity of son of Mary. Whatever damage this ostensible reference in the Qur’an causes to the Christian sensibilities, is perfectly counterbalanced when the Qur’an honours Jesus with the esoteric title, “*Kalima*” or “Word of God”.

The concept of Godhead or Holy Trinity indicated in the Gospels suggests that the Ultimate Reality, (1) in His role as “The Word,” remains immanent in the whole of universe from alpha to omega as its causal agent, sustainer and indweller until its dissolution (2) transcends the universe and exists eternally as the “Father” before the manifestation of universe and even after its final dissolution and (3) seeks mutual (coupled/synchronized) indwelling within all entities of the universe including humans and their communities as the “Holy Spirit”. Thus the three persons of the Holy Trinity represent various functions of the Father or the Ultimate Transcendent Reality. The Gospels point to the concept of the Holy Trinity by clearly revealing the general relation and the ideal equations between (1) the Ultimate Reality, (2) the Word or cosmic reality and (3) the humans. By virtue of the free will, humans who are the most complex species or the pinnacle of creation enjoy the option of leading their lives either perfectly in tune with his/her bodily instincts or fully or partially in synchronization with their inner Consciousness, indweller, Self or Holy Spirit, that transcends their bodies. Our bodies are temples of Holy Spirit (1 Cor 3:16) and there is a veil of imperfection within us separating us from the “cave of our heart” where God is present in His fullness. Those who learn to attain synchronization with the inner Spirit can enter this inner sanctum sanctorum or “*holy of holies*” (Ex 26:33) just as Jesus our forerunner entered it (Heb 6:19). The successful ones experience a unique feeling of “oneness with the Spirit.”⁴

The following words spoken by Jesus in first person can be attributed to that of the cosmic reality or “the Word.”

1. Jesus replied: “Anyone who loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we shall come to him and make a home in him” (John 14:23).

⁴Such experiences are expressed through various terminologies in various traditions. The *Advaitic* concepts of *Brahman*, *Purusha* and *Atman* in Hinduism correlate the concept of Holy Trinity very well including the oneness of the three apparently disparate entities and the mutual synchronized indwelling concept. “Trinitarian Experience of A Christian and *Advaitic* Experience of a Hindu,” *Journal of Dharma*, Vol XXVII, April-June 2002.

2. “On that day you will know that I am in my Father and you in me and I in you” (John 14: 20).

3. “May they all be one, just as, Father, you are in me and I am in you, so that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe it was you who sent me” (John 17:21).

These verses indicate that the Father and the Word are already synchronized with each other and that they entreat humans also to share in this synchronization voluntarily, by recognizing and submitting to the indwelling Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit operates by residing in the Word, just as the Word operates by residing in the Father. “But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you” (John 16:13-15).

Perhaps the Qur’an might not have criticized the concept of Holy Trinity if the early Christians had pronounced that the Holy Trinity constitutes the Father, the Word and the Holy Spirit (I John 5:7), where each one of them represents various functions, one within the other and that they are indeed inseparable from the other and inconceivable through forms. While referring to Holy Trinity, it is not the physical role of Jesus that should come to our mind as the second person, but his wider role as the pre-existent Word. We must also realize that the Word was sent into the world by the Father in the form of Jesus (John 1:18; 8:42; 16:28; 17:4-5) and that he was lifted up (John 3:14) when his mission was completed without subtracting anything from the Holy Trinity or adding anything to it. We also have to accept the prerogative of the Word as the Lord of the universe to shape-up various communities of the world, and to communicate with each of them by manifesting amongst them in whatever manner He deems fit in order to bridge the gaps in the mutual tripartite union or relationship envisaged in the Gospels.

7. Death and Resurrection of Jesus

Literal interpretation of the Qur’an gives the impression that Jesus was not killed on the cross. The metaphoric style used in the Qur’an permits us to interpret it in a simple manner without contradicting the Gospels and the Qur’an. According to the Qur’an, Jesus himself foretold about his death and resurrection unambiguously (Qur’an 19:33; 5:117). The Quran says

that some errant contemporaries of Jesus claimed that they killed Jesus. But because of this boasting of the perpetrators, and because of their disbelief in Jesus and scandalizing of Mary, Allah schemed against them and outsmarted them and thwarted their claims by resurrecting and drawing Jesus unto Himself. Hence the real death of Jesus became illusory and unreal to the schemers. All the “People of the Book” will identify Jesus as their witness and will believe in him without fail “before his death” when God assembles all communities together. Those who believed in him would remain one step above those who disbelieved until the Day of Resurrection (4:156-159; 3:50-58).

Bible confirms the fact that the body of Jesus didn’t see corruption after death. He was bodily resurrected on the third day. Jesus appeared alive to his disciples for forty days before he ascended to heaven (Acts 1:3; 13:35-37). Hence in the above sense, the Qur’an is in agreement with the Gospels when it says that the Jews did not “kill” or eliminate Jesus. We may realize that the Qur’an portrays the death and resurrection of Jesus figuratively by suggesting that Allah allowed Jesus to overcome death by drawing him unto Himself. The following metaphoric style in the Quran supports this kind of interpretation. “... (S)peak not of those who are slain in the way of God as dead. Nay, (they are) alive, but you perceive not” (2:154, 3:168-170). The Gospels also follow such style. “Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he shall never see death” (John 8:51). “He who hears my word and believes Him who sent me has eternal life and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life” (John 5:24).

The Qur’an states in surah 4:157 that Jesus was not killed but raised unto Allah and in surah 4:159, it makes a prophecy that all the People of the Book including the Jews and Christians will believe in Jesus before his death. Many Hadith records speak about the return of Jesus. One of them teaches that Jesus will descend amongst mankind as a just ruler.⁵ Another teaches that Jesus will return to receive the homage of all the peoples: Jews, Christians and Muslims, in fulfillment of Surah 4:159 and that he will judge mankind justly.⁶ Yet another teaches that when Jesus returns, he will destroy antichrist, fight for the cause of Islam, establish “Islam” and will then die like all other living beings.⁷ All these do not necessarily

⁵ *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Vol.3, Book 43, no: 656

⁶ *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Vol.4, Book 55, no: 657

⁷ Sunan Abu-Dawud, Book 37, no: 4310

mean that mankind will convert either to Islam or Christianity and that Jesus is still physically alive. The futuristic “death of Jesus” which will be preceded by the show of genuine faith by the entire People of the Book including Jews as envisioned in the Qur’an is probably a metaphoric event. For Christians, it is reminiscent of the end of the first coming and the beginning of the Second Coming of Jesus. On his Second Coming, he wears “several crowns”, relinquishes all names and takes on his original glorified role as the Word of God (Rev 19:12-13, John 17:5). In other words, he will unite all humanity under the banner of “Word of God” and hand over the Kingdom to the Father who will dwell within the temple of all human hearts (1 Cor 15:23-28, Rev 21:3).

At that point of time, Jews will probably recognize the messianic role of Jesus and accept Gospel teachings as “spiritual food” or “Word of God” without having to surrender their Jewish identity or to become Christians. By promulgating the theory that Judaism and other religions have become irrelevant after the Christ-event until now, the Christian community has indirectly denied the right of others including the Jewish community to believe and live in their own way. But the Jewish identity among others may continue to be preserved by God beyond the second millennia for the benefit of future generations who can marvel at the various ways in which God guides his beloved children from the days of Adam through various forms of spiritual food or Word of God.

The Jews even today hold the same objections to the divine nature of Jesus as their early predecessors. They may forego their objections to Jesus’ claim of “oneness” with the Father (John 10:30-33), if we are able to convince them about the true meaning behind this metaphoric utterance. They will no more get offended about having to eat and drink the flesh and blood of Jesus in the context of their kosher rules, if we are able to convince them that when he made such an utterance (John 6:41-60), he was metaphorically equating the totality of himself and his teachings with “Word of God or spiritual food.” Eating spiritual food means assimilating spiritual teachings fully into our way of life until we surrender fully to God and start doing what God wills for us. Jesus indicated elsewhere that he himself had to eat spiritual food, which meant executing the will of the Father (John 4:32-34). Jesus has also made it very clear that he will simply ignore the sycophant Christians, who do not know how to recognize the will of God, despite sharing his meals regularly (Mt 7:22-23; 1 John 3:6; Luke 13:26-27). By the time most Christians become true Christians by implementing the Trinitarian mutual indwelling concepts in their day-to-

day life, the Gospels will certainly become acceptable as valuable and meaningful spiritual food not only to the Jews, but also to all others as “Good News”. By that time, we would have reached such a stage that we can present the Gospels to others after delineating the human and divine roles of Jesus without deviating from any of the Gospel teachings.

7. Conclusion

Christian mission will continue to be relevant as long as there are lost sheep or unrighteous people in the world who are not spiritually surrendered to any form of “Word of God,” and not led by the Spirit of God. Jesus will continue to be preached as the demonstrative manifestation of the Word of God and as the perfect model for all mankind. Figuratively, the crucifixion, death and resurrection are events that everyone has to necessarily undergo during their spiritual evolution, if they continue to abide in the Word of God (Rom 6:4-7; 8:17; Gal 2:19-20, Gal. 5:24; Rom 8:13-14; 1 Pet 4:1-2, Rom. 6:6-8). They represent the process of metamorphosis taking place in the life of a spiritual aspirant, leading him/her gradually into “baptism of heart” or “rebirth” (John 3:3-7; Eph.4:22-24). The stage will be set for the Second Coming of Jesus when Christians assimilate the true meaning of the human role of Jesus and start looking beyond towards his transcendent and harmonizing role as the eternal Word of God within the world. If we manage to declare without undermining any of the Gospel truths, that the Torah and the Qur’an are indeed “Word of God” or valid revelations leading to salvation, then the Jews and Muslims will find it easier to join hands with us and to march towards “Wider Ecumenism,” under the banner of Word of God.⁸

The apparently irreconcilable contradictions between the Gospels and the Qur’an have prevented the rightful mutual understanding and trust that should have existed between the Christians and Muslims. This will be overcome in the fullness of time, when the eternal Spirit brings all the people together under the common umbrella of “the Word of God” during the “Wedding Feast of the Lamb” (Rev 19:6-10) or the “Day of Assembly.” Based on a conditional presumption that both the Holy Books as they exist now are genuine revelations or Word of God from the same God, let us start reading each other’s Holy Book with purified eyes, and jointly try to unravel the larger divine plan for both the communities. The

⁸The concept of “Participated Mediation” proposed by the late Pope John Paul II in *Redemptoris Missio* (1990) supports this concept.

Qur'an says that the faithful, righteous and spiritually wise followers of other Holy Books can recognize that the essence of their Holy Books is the same as the message of "Islam" in the Qur'an. It admits that members of all communities who practice the "religion" of "absolute submission to the will of God" (Islam) are on the right path.

The Second Vatican Council is a good example of how the Christians drastically renewed their theology and their approach to other religions in tune with the evolving world, after realizing partially, the "rays of truth" found in other Holy Books. If their ongoing search for truth reveals clearly that all Holy Books contain the same "wine", "spiritual food" or "Word of God", presented in different forms, Christians may not shy away from declaring it in their next conclave. This will ignite among all religious communities, an intense spiritual awakening towards the transcendent dynamic Spirit or "Word of God" who remains active behind all symbols and dogmas. It will usher in a new era where the entire human race share a warm feeling of fraternity and rejoicing despite holding various types of identities. The invitation for this "Wedding Feast" is held by not only the Christians, but also the followers of all religions. The servants of God who wear the white robe of righteousness, and seek the will of God, shall bring about this grand turnaround foretold in all the Holy Books.

The message of Jesus is indeed "Good News" for all the religious traditions of the world that uphold their Holy Books as the "Word of God." Though the ritualistic celebrations may differ, based on the type of divine intervention the individual communities have experienced during their formative years, the inner message of repentance and reformation that leads to righteousness is the same in all Holy Books. A true Hindu or a true Muslim or a true Jew who has captured the Light of their respective Holy Books will never reject the message of Christ as false; rather they will accept it as "Good News", if it is put across to them in the right perspective by the Christians.

