Muslims and the Christian Other: Nasara in Qur'anic Readings

In the Qur'an Christians are most often indicated with the word Nasara, i.e. Nazarenes. This contribution studies the Jewish origin and the Qur'anic use of the word. It analyzes modern Muslim interpretations of the Qur'anic verses about Nasara in two Indonesian commentaries, one by Zainal Arifin Abbas and the other by Hamka. Finally the author discusses the ambiguity of terminology and of modern Muslim perceptions of Christianity and pleads for a theory of otherness to overcome the problematic aspects of Muslim views on Christians.

The Islamic scripture has a rich variety of names and titles for Jesus. His most common name is Son of Mary, used twenty three times in the 99 verses devoted to Jesus in the Qur'an. Other appellations, or even honorific titles, are the Messiah (al-masih, eleven times), Servant (Arabic `abd, the equivalent of the Hebrew `ebed, three times), Prophet (nabi, only in 19:30), Messenger (rasul, ten times), Word (kalima, five times), Spirit (ruh seven times), Sign (aya, also used in the meaning of verse of the Qur'an, but four times applied to Jesus), Example (mathal), Witness (shahid), Mercy (rahma), Eminence (wajih), One brought near (min al-muqarrabin), One of the upright (min al-salihin) and Blessed (mubarak).\footnote{For references see Parrinder, G. Jezus in the Qurán, Londen, Sheldon 1965:16-54; also Steenbrink, K., Jezus and the Holy Spirit in the Writings of Nur al-Din al-Raniri, Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, 1990, Vol 1: 192-207.} The terminology for Christians themselves is much more sober and modest than the rich terminology for Jesus. Apart from the use of the words related to Jesus (e.g. Qur'an 61:14 where the apostles are mentioned as `Helpers of Jesus'), Christians are most often indicated with the term ahl-al-kitab (people of the book, also used for Jews) and some equivalents such as `those who were given the book', `those who read the book before you'. In quite a few of these cases it is not certain whether Jews or Christians (or both groups) are meant. There is, however, no doubt in the case of the terms Yahud for Jews and Nasara (`Nazarenes') for Christians. In the Qur'an the word Nasara is used in fourteen verses, occurring in four different suras. These places are: in sura al-Baqara, 2:62,111,113 (twice), 120,135,140; sura al-Ma‘idah, 5:14,18,51,69,82; sura at-Taubah 9:30, sura al-Hajj 22:17. These reference are all from the later or Madina period of the life of the prophet. All these verses use the word in its plural form. Only 3:67 has the singular form of Nasrani, talking about Abraham: `No: Abraham in truth was not a Jew, neither a Christian, but he was a Muslim and one of pure faith; certainly he was never of the idolaters.'
The first part of this contribution presents a general history of the origin and the first application of this word in the Qur'anic/Islamic context. Used in the Jewish tradition as an indication of a separate practice or small group of believers, and in the Christian tradition as a nickname for backward 'Galilean' outsiders and heretics, in the Qur'anic development it underlines the 'otherness' of the Christians, while at the same time acknowledging the many similarities. In the second part we will give a summary of some modern Muslim interpretations of the Qur'anic verses about Nasara, concentrating on two Indonesian commentaries. They continue this ambivalence of similarity and otherness for the modern period, but the otherness is clearly dominating. In Christian terminology one would say: exclusivism is the general trend. In the third part we will examine whether modern theology has developed tools to overcome the problematic aspects of the ambiguity of the Muslim perceptions of Christianity. We will see that Islamic theology developed its own. We will develop our argument in relation to the theory of otherness as outlined by Rogier van Rossum and Wiel Eggen.2

1. Nazarenes, Nazareth and Nasara

One possible Jewish root for the word Nasara is the tractate of Nazir in the Talmud. It deals with the laws of the Nazirite (Num. 6:1-21), the vow not to cut one's hair and not to drink wine. This practice became well-known through the biblical story of Samson. Num 6:2ff define it as a 'vow of separation to the Lord'. After the destruction of the second temple it became impossible to complete naziriteship through offering the sacrifices on its conclusion (Num. 6:13 “This is the law for the nazirite when the period of his separation is over. He is to be brought to the entrance to the Tent of Meeting.”). Mainstream modern Jewish thought relates the critical attitude of later Judaism towards naziriteship to the rabbinic disapproval of ascetism as a practice against the spirit of Judaism, a rejection which was also a Muslim conviction.3 There is also a classical Islamic doctrine about Islam as the middle way between a too ascetic Christianity and a too materialistic Judaism. ‘Rather they are people of the middle path and of equilibrium in their religion. God characterized them as people of the middle position’.4 Although some scholars accept the possibility of it having an origin in the old Jewish custom (or even sect) of the Nazirite5, the most common theory is that Nasara, the Qur'anic term for Christians, derives from the Talmudic and Eastern Christian use and

3 See Encyclopaedia Judaica s.v. ‘Nazirite’.