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Quranic Christology in Late Antiquity. 'Isa ibn Maryam and His Divine Power (*Energeia*) in the Islamic Revelation

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Abstract: Christology and monotheism have been dogmatically linked in the long history of Islam-Christian dialogue since the beginning of the 8th century. The Qur'an, in an analytical perception of religious otherness, specifically in relation to Christianity, assumed a dual discernment: on the one hand, it adopts a sceptical position because Christians are assimilationist (2: 120, 135, 145; 5: 51), sectarian and made Jesus the son of God (4: 171; 5: 14–19, 73; 9: 30; 18: 4–5; 21: 26); on the other hand, they are commended over the Jews and 'Isa ibn Maryam has been strengthened with the Holy Spirit by God himself (2: 59, 62, 87, 253; 3: 48; 5: 47, 73, 82, 85, 110). The importance of enforcing the consciousness of a Quranic Christology, specifically where it concerned the potential influence that Christological doctrines such as adoptionism and monoenergism had on early Islam in late antiquity, where it was based on the proto-Islamic understanding of Jesus, and where it was rooted in Patristic orthodox-unorthodox debates, fell into oblivion. How was the Quranic canonization process affected by the ongoing Christological debates of the 7th century? Could Heraclius' monoenergism have played a concrete influence on Quranic Christology? And in which way did early *Kalam* debates on God's speech and will remain linked to Quranic Christology?

Keywords: Qur'anic Christology; 'Isa ibn Maryam; *Kalam*; monothelitism; God's attributes



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1. Introduction. Sources and Methodological Problems

The historical debate on the Islamic-Quranic interpretation and understanding of 'Isa ibn Maryam alias Jesus, has been faced many times by Academia since the early Islamic centuries. By the eighth century, various oriental Christian authorities engaged in oral and written dialogues with Muslims about their faith and their understanding and interpretation of the figure of Jesus Christ in a concrete intellectual debate: this is a prominent example of Islam-Christian inter-religious conversation which was usually approved of by the caliphs in power at the time.

In the early ninth century, those dialogues showed “on the one hand that Christology was not completely alien to Islamic beliefs, and on the other, that it was acceptable for Christians to hold such views even in a society ruled by Muslims” (Beaumont 2005a, p. xxii), and in the Caliph's presence. Timothy I, patriarch of the Nestorian Church (d. 823), Theodore Abu Qurra (d. 825–829 ca), Habib ibn Khidma Abu Ra'ita (d. 835 ca) and 'Ammar al-Basri (d. 845 ca) are the most relevant Christian figures who were directly engaged in this historical debate with their Islamic counterparts.

However, the purpose of this study is to work on the correlation and the plausible influence of the last internal Christological debates which emerged during the reign of the emperor Heraclius (d. 641) on the canonization process of 'Isa ibn Maryam in the Qur'an. It would be coherent to think that if the Islamic revelation in 30: 2–7 could refer, historically, to the previous and last Roman-Persian war, which ended in 628 AD (Tesei 2018, pp. 1–29), the impact of the monothelitism-monoenergic debate in the 7th century should have played a similar role during the canonization of the Qur'anic revelation as well as in the written elaboration of God's word in an edited text (7–8th centuries).

Specifically, I will parallelize the Qur'anic verses on 'Isa ibn Maryam's human nature and those in which a spirit from God is put into Mary's womb and into Jesus's active body, with the 7th century debate about Jesus's energy and capability to act not only as a human being. Both investigative lines need to be understood, on the one hand, against the Christian historical background of Jesus having been perceived as the "son of God" since the beginning of the Christian era (3rd–4th centuries). On the other, the Islamic *Kalam* conceptualization of God's attributes, as it will emerge in the 8–10th centuries, needs to be logically inserted in relation to Quranic Christology in a re-interpretation of 'Isa ibn Maryam's status which never occurred.

It has to be clear that this hypothesis is speculatively supported through an historical-analytical formulation related to the Abrahamic roots of Islam, the impact of the Arab conquests in the Levant and the influence that the conquered geographical areas had in framing Islamic identity (Demichelis 2021).

I will not enter into the Christian-Islamic debate of God's filiation as in its carnal-literal interpretation; as already explained by M. Abdel Haleem (2010, p. xxxi) in his introduction to the Qur'an, the meaning of *walad/walid* at the time of the Qur'an's canonization (7th–8th centuries) in Arab society was different from its meaning in Modern Arabic. The preliminary meaning in which "new born, child, offspring" (4: 171) becomes the verb "to give birth", but also in the transitive form, "to procreate as to beget-generate offspring" (2: 116; 5: 110), would not make it clearer, but on the contrary, less clear in relation to the lack of terminological-linguistic exactitude of the terms adopted in the preliminary written versions of the Qur'an in the early Islamic age (Hilali 2017; Leivirk 2010; Parrinder 2013). Jesus is given the title of Messiah eleven times in the Qur'an (3: 40–45; 4: 156–57; 4: 169–72; 5: 17–19 etc.) although the meaning of this title is not explained. He is also called '*abd*, servant, *nabī*, *rasul*, even "a word from God" (3: 34–39) and "supported", "aided" by the Spirit of Allah (2: 81–87; 2: 253–54; 4: 169–71; 5: 109–10) as well as: a sign, a *Shahid*, eminent (*wajih*), blessed and "a mercy from us" (19: 21). (Parrinder 2013, p. 30ff.).

The study will therefore deal, first of all, with what the Qur'an says about 'Isa ibn Maryam, in particular in relation to his birth, nature and death, as well as the early exegetical interpretation of these passages in the 8–12th centuries.

Secondly, it is important to frame the monoenergetic-monotheism, Chalcedonian non-Chalcedonian hypothesis about Jesus, as stated during Heraclius' time: the Synod of Jerusalem of 749, which took place after the emperor's death and did not reach ecumenical status, was held to condemn the monoenergetic-monotheism hypothesis.

However, this is probably one of the best documents to elucidate the Christological dilemma as well as to clarify some of its important passages. In parallel, it is important to stress the Christian heretic thesis on Jesus that emerged in some verses of the Qur'an, such as 3:49, that clearly have an apocryphal evangelic origin (Craveri 2005, pp. 89–90) as well as, probably, docetic-ebionite sources (4: 157ff.).

Finally, before the conclusions, it will be important to stress the *Kalam* theory concerning God's essential and active attributes and how this debate is logically linked to Qur'an Christology. It will be important to focus in particular on its Ash'arite interpretation in the 10th century.

2. 'Isa ibn Maryam in the Qur'an: A Divine Spirit in a Human Body

The importance of this section in Quranic Christology is bi-univocally related to what 'Isa ibn Maryam is and what he is not. The Islamic revelation indeed argued that Jesus was born from the Virgin Mary, that he had the power of God in performing miracles and that he did not die on the Cross; however, he was a Prophet and a Messenger, but clearly not God's son.

It is therefore important to briefly stress the attention on these singular aspects and their origin as well as their impact on the subsequent understanding of 'Isa ibn Maryam.

In 3:45–49, the Qur'an argues:

“The angels said, ‘Mary, God gives you news of a Word from Him (*bikalimatin minhu*), whose name will be the Messiah (*al-Masih*), Jesus, son of Mary, who will be held in honour in this world and the next (*fi ad-Dunya wa al-‘Akhira*), who will be one of those brought near to God (*wa mina al-Muqarrabina*). He will speak to people in his infancy¹ and in his adulthood. He will be one of the righteous.’ She said, ‘My Lord, how can I have a son when no man has touched me?’ (*Qalat Rabbi ‘Anna Yakunu Li Waladun Wa Lam Yamsasni Basharun*) [The angel] said, ‘This is how God creates what He will: when He has ordained something, He only says, “Be”, and it is. He will teach him the Scripture and wisdom, the Torah and the Gospel (*Wa Yu‘allimuhu, al-Kitaba wa al-Hikmata wa at-Tawraata wa al-‘Injila*) He will send him as a messenger to the Children of Israel: “I have come to you with a sign from your Lord: I will make the shape of a bird for you out of clay, then breathe into it and, with God’s permission, it will become a real bird; I will heal the blind and the leper, and bring the dead back to life with God’s permission;² I will tell you what you may eat and what you may store up in your houses. There truly is a sign for you in this, if you are believers.”

‘Isa Ibn Maryam is a Word from God (*kalimatuhu*), he will be called the Messiah and he is among those that are closest to God. His mother was a Virgin as reported again in 19:19–21: “a pure son” (*Ghulamaan Zakyyan*) and Jesus did not have a carnal father, an aspect which will be adopted in the inter-religious Islam-Christian debate about the absolute “abnormal” status of ‘Isa ibn Maryam (Beaumont 2005a, pp. 2–3).

As confirmed in 2: 87, 253 and 5: 110: “We gave Jesus, son of Mary, clear signs and strengthened him with the Holy Spirit (*Wa ‘ayyadnahu biruhi al-Qudusi*)”: ‘Isa ibn Maryam has been guided and empowered by God’s Holy Spirit, which makes him a *primus inter pares* among the Abrahamic Prophets, in particular concerning his ability to perform miracles, the main active evidence of the presence of a superior power (or energy) that acts through him and his body.

If the Islamic explanation and theological doubts over the centuries have been related to Jesus’ creative power as well as who is truly responsible for performing these miracles (God, Jesus, Gabriel etc.), it is important for our debate to clarify from the beginning that in the Islamic *milieu* this power of ‘Isa ibn Maryam came from God. However, the performance of miracles could also consider the active attitude of the human being that is not independent from the deity but prone to use the power he received from Him or from the Angel Gabriel.³ Jesus is pure from his birth as Maryam is, and this aspect emphasizes the relationship between ‘Isa, Maryam and God from the beginning, from his very conception, establishing a clear difference from Moses who, if he was able to perform miracles during his prophetic life, gained this ability not in infancy but in adulthood.

Two other eminent Qur’anic passages have emerged as particularly important for our analysis: 4:157–59, which clearly denies that ‘Isa ibn Maryam died on the cross:

“and said, ‘We have killed the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, the Messenger of God. They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him (*Wa ma Qalaluhu wa ma Salabuhu*), though it was made to appear like that to them; those that disagreed about him are full of doubt, with no knowledge to follow, only supposition: they certainly did not kill him- No! God raised him (*Rafa’ahu*) up to Himself. God is almighty and wise. There is not one of the People of the Book who will not believe in Jesus before his death, and on the Day of Resurrection he will be a witness against them (*Wa ‘in min ‘Ahli al-Kitabi ‘Illa Layu‘uminanna bihi qabla marwitihi wa yawma al-Qiyamati Yakunu ‘Alayhim Shahidaan*).”

Since the epoch of Ignatius of Antioch (d. ca 108–140 AD) Christian sources had argued that Jesus “suffered in semblance” only; there are two verses in St. Paul’s Epistles (Philippians 2, 6–8; Hebrews, 2, 17) that could stress an interpretation in this direction: “Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness;

and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross." and, "Surely he did not help angels but rather the descendants of Abraham, therefore he had to become like his brothers in every day, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest before God to expiate the sins of the people." This is an idea that probably also reached the canonization process of the Islamic revelation through osmosis.

The denial of Jesus's death on the cross is part of a late antiquity docetic and gnostic approach in which 'Isa ibn Maryam having a physical body did not emerge until his prophetic life. This lasted only from after his baptism in the River Jordan, his journey in Palestine and until his apparent death on the cross.

However, if this lucubration is problematic in relation to the miracles and wisdom of Jesus's infancy and adolescence as emerging from the apocryphal gospels on his childhood and in the Qur'an itself, Gabriel Said Reynolds in *"The Muslim Jesus: Dead or Alive?"* (Reynolds 2009, pp. 237–58) argues that the possible docetic-monophysite roots of this Qur'anic Christological passage were assumed by Muslim exegetes in a clear anti-Christian attitude, to emphasize how Muslims had inherited a real understanding of 'Isa ibn Maryam and his carnal-spiritual eschatological path.

This is clarified in the commentary by Ibn Khatir on the above verses, but specifically on 4:159 (Khatir 2003, vol. 1 pp. 550–53): all the People of the Book before the return of 'Isa ibn Maryam to the earth will already have converted, accepting his real comprehension, including the Jews. Moreover, Jesus will return to the earth to fight the *Dajjal* but also to compel Christians to become Muslims, which is a narrative that is clearly in contrast with 5:48, in which the Qur'an affirms that God: "has assigned a law and a path to each of you (Jewish, Christians and Muslims). If God has so willed, He would have made you one community, but He wanted to test you through that which He has given you, so race to do good. You will all return to God and He will make clear to you the matters you differed about."

Quranic Christology became a real subject of inter-religious confrontation but without being capable of explaining the peculiarity of the nature of Christ. On the contrary, the Qur'an is eminently transparent in affirming that Jesus is not the son of God in 4:171 and 9:30, but "a messenger, His word directed to Mary and a spirit from Him (*rasulu allahi wa Kalimatuhu 'alqaha ila maryama wa rahun minhu*)".

"A Spirit from Him" is not in contrast, but certainly different from the Qur'anic verses in which 'Isa ibn Maryam is aided and supported by the Spirit of Holiness (2: 81–87; 2: 253–54; 5: 109) or from those in which Mary "was blown inside" by Our spirit (19: 17; 66: 12 etc.). However, if the support of the Holy Spirit given to Jesus can be more easily understood in relation to the parallelism in the Qur'an in which support has come through the Spirit; the understanding of 4: 169–71 is more problematic.

The *Tafsir* of Ibn Abbas (Abbas 2014, pp. 234–35; Tr. 2007, p. 109), in parallel with the *Sira an-Nabawiyya* of Ibn Ishaq, states that the information on Jesus came from the Christians of Najran who maintained that Jesus was the Son of God and His partner; nevertheless, Ibn Abbas argues that: "(nor utter aught concerning Allah save the Truth. The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only a messenger of Allah, and His word which He conveyed unto Mary), and through His word he became a created being, (and a spirit from Him) and through His command, Jesus became a son without a father", in which the spirit from Him is logically associated with God's spirit (*ruh*), while "His command", made 'Isa a son without father.

Al-Tabari, in his hermeneutical Qur'anic work, argues that in this case, differently from 2: 87 in which: "strengthened Him with the Holy Spirit", the Holy Spirit is Gabriel (we will return to this later) while in 4: 171 this is a specific spirit that God sent precisely to 'Isa ibn Maryam (Tabari 1957, vol. 5, pp. 65–66).

Ibn Khatir, unusually, argues that: "'Isa is a Word from Allah that he bestowed on Maryam, meaning He created him with the word 'Be' that he sent with Jibril (Gabriel) on Maryam. Jibril blew his life of 'Isa into Maryam by Allah's leave, and 'Isa came into existence as a result. This incident was in place of the normal conception between man and

woman that results in children. This is why ‘Isa was a Word and a *Ruh* (spirit) created by Allah, as he had no father to conceive him.” (Khatir 2003, vol. 3, p. 56).

Finally, al-Jalalayn’s interpretation, different from previous ones, highlights how: “the Messiah, Jesus the son of Mary, was only the Messenger of God, and His Word which He cast to, (which) He conveyed to, Mary, and a spirit, that is, one whose spirit is, from Him: he (Jesus) is here attached to God, exalted be He, as an honoring for him, and not as you claim, that he is the son of God, or a god alongside Him, or one of three, because one that possesses a spirit is compound, while God transcends being compound and the attribution of compounds to Him.” (Jalalayn 2008, pp. 111–12). This is particularly interesting in relation to the “composition”: since Jesus’ birth is unnatural (without a carnal father), the terminology adopted even many centuries after the canonization of the Qur’an and in the Tafsir remained complex and obscure: Jesus is created and compounded even though as a human being he should have been “generated,” as well as created through a carnal and spiritual nature as completely human.

However, according to Ibn Hishaq’s *Sira* (Guillame 1955, p. 657) in a “letter” sent by Muhammad to the Negus of Abyssinia, the Prophet himself argues: “and I bear witness that Jesus son of Mary is the spirit of God and His word which He cast to Mary, the Virgin, the good, the pure, so that she conceived Jesus. God created him from His spirit and His breathing and He created Adam by His hand and His breathing.” Again, this is different from the above interpretations, except that of Ibn Abbas, whose *Tafsir* presumably emerged in the same historical phase and geographical area as the prophet’s biography.

Vice versa, Qur’anic assertions on the Trinity stress a devotion to Mary as part of it (5: 116), something which has no trace in the history of Christianity, even with the Ebionites in the Arabian Peninsula (Finazzo 2005): from the beginning of the Christian era, Mary was certainly widely venerated, but never as a part of the Trinity. The Qur’an affirms the virginal conception of ‘Isa ibn Maryam in his mother’s womb but the Christian understanding of the Incarnation is ruled out (Beaumont 2005a, p. 10). However, the same revelation is rich in Christological passages which are briefly quoted above and that today, as in the 9–10th century, remain unsolved at a cognitive-hermeneutical level.

There are two main aspects that need to be examined in this paragraph in the attempt to better contextualize the Christological features related to ‘Isa ibn Maryam: his physical and spiritual nature, his actions and his prophetic activity.

1. The Qur’an confirmed that Jesus was pure from his birth, he did not have a male father and he was born of a virgin woman, Maryam; he received clear signs and God strengthened him with the Holy Spirit, that in 2:87 would be logically identifiable as quite close to the same conceptualization that we can find in the Gospels.

However, unlike the *fitra*, the pure status of every new-born, which in the Qur’an does not clearly emerge as a meaningful word (*fitratun*), appears only once in the entire revelation (30:30) and will be theologically explained in the following centuries. The Holy Spirit granted by God to Jesus is also usually translated as *soul* (Abdel Haleem 2008, pp. 387–88) as it will be better described in the subsequent centuries by *mutakallimun* and philosophers. This specific Soul-Holy Spirit that came directly from God, has been interpreted quite unanimously over the centuries: al-Tabari, for example, in the comment on 2: 87, argues that the Spirit is Gabriel, as do Qatada, al-Suddi and al-Rabi’ ibn Anas before him (Tabari 1987, pp. 438–39). Others, such as Ibn Said, argued that the Spirit was the Gospel, nevertheless, Ibn Khatir (vol. 1, p. 288) and Jalalayn (2008, p. 16) in their work support early Islamic interpretations of *Ruh al-Qudus*, symbolized as Jibril (Gabriel).

Gabriel’s presence in the Christian annunciation to Mary is clearly confirmed in the canonical and un-canonical Gospels: in Luke: (. . .) the angel Gabriel comes to Maryam at Nazareth and salutes her as the “highly favoured, the Lord is with thee”, he is the same one who informed Jesus’ mother that Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, will conceive a child in her old age, as nothing is impossible for God.

The Islamic interpretations of the Holy Spirit as Gabriel open up a number of problems which are difficult to answer in relation to Jibril’s status, nature, and relationship with

God, and which do not come within the aims of this article; on the contrary, following the annunciation, 'Isa ibn Maryam is made a messenger who from his infancy is empowered by God to perform all the "miracles" that the Qur'an also reports on some occasions (19: 30–33; 3: 48–51; 5: 112–14).

The comparisons that Islamic exegetes (Robinson 1988, pp. 1–16; Thomas 2002, pp. 221–43) will make to diminish 'Isa ibn Maryam's power in relation to previous prophets of the Islamic tradition, is even more confusing. Adam,⁴ whose creation without a father or a mother, was considered even more unusual than that of 'Isa ibn Maryam, seems disconnected from a real comparative approach: Jesus's birth is like that of every human being, the creation of Adam is not comparable to any other man; in parallel, and the Qur'an focuses greatly on this aspect, the presence of the Holy Spirit (Jibril or not) in Jesus is why he can perform miracles, but these miracles are not attributed to Adam in the Islamic revelation; on the contrary, Adam with his wife Eve will be driven out of the Garden of Heaven (20: 120–24) for having listened to the Snake.

In the Qur'an, other prophets also had the ability to perform miracles: Moses is attributed with many un-natural events, from the plagues of Egypt (7: 133–37; 18: 101–2; 26: 52–60 etc.), he was capable of making water spring from a rock (2:60) and throwing a rod on the ground which then became a snake (7:107) emphasizing the ability of God to perform miracles through his prophets.

However, it is undeniable that there are differences between Moses' requests to God in: "lifting up my heart and ease my task for me. Untie my tongue so that they understand my words and give me a helper from my family, my brother Aaron, augment my strength through him." (20:25–33) and the fact that both (Moses and Aaron) were sent by God: "with our signs" (7: 103; 10:75; 11: 96; 14:5 etc.) and being a pure boy who received the word and a spirit from God since his birth.

In parallel, and as already suggested above, the relationship between Jesus and the Holy Spirit is unique, the other prophets, Muhammad included, for whom the prophetic phase is strongly associated with Gabriel from the beginning, are not associated with a Holy Spirit, neither is Moses, who was able to act through "our signs" (7: 103, 136; 10: 75, 92; 11: 96 etc.).

The difference is not related to the fact that both, even if at different phases in their lives, are actively authorized by God's power to perform miracles such as speaking through the word of God, but that God decided to grant an infinitesimal part of his essence, a Spirit from Him (4: 171), to a human being: 'Isa ibn Maryam, exceptionally and without other similar examples in the Islamic revelation.

2. The assumption that Jesus's miraculous actions are symptomatic of the active power of the Holy Spirit (through Gabriel or not) stresses a logic and rational hypothesis that there are moments of 'Isa ibn Maryam's life when it is the power of God that speaks and acts, but there are others, more related to common actions, in which he acts as a normal human being: this reflection suggests the possibility of a double nature.

If, however, God's words, as well as becoming part of a revelation, are inspired (*'ahwa*) by God to Jesus directly or through Jibril like the prophets of the Qur'anic revelation (a few lines above, we highlighted Moses' request to the Fire to untie his tongue to make him more understandable), the actions performed and the miracles are a manifestation of the active essence of God himself who shows his power in the world. This is unlike the classic Islamic assumption that the prophets' inclination to perform miracles is symptomatic of the presence of prophethood (Rippin 2006; Rubin 2014, pp. 65–96; Friedmann 1986, pp. 178–215) without anything else. A more precise analysis should work on the relationship between Jesus and the Holy Spirit and how they act together.

It is true that in the Qur'an there are verses (16: 2, 102; 17: 85; 26: 193; 40: 15; 58: 22) in which the Spirit under God's command and will acts to fortify human beings, others such as 70: 4, 78: 38, in which the Spirit with the Angels seems an actor detached from God himself, like the Archangel Gabriel (Abdel Haleem 2010, p. 584), and others, such as 21:91 and 66:12 that clearly refer to the story of Jesus and Maryam.⁵

If we can assume that the spirit of the last verses is the same as in the previous ones, we need to logically presume that it is this Holy Spirit, by God's will, that allowed Maryam to be the mother of Jesus: a pro-creative act in which Allah's will and Maryam's pregnancy and delivery remained cohesively joined in empowering a peculiar child that possessed an infinitesimal part of God's spirit from his infancy. This was a singular empowering that Moses and Adam did not have.

Also because—and this is the real problem of all the Muslim exegeses that from Ibn Abbas in the 8th century have associated the Holy Spirit with Gabriel—the Qur'anic concept of the Holy Spirit as *ruh al-Qudus* is associated only with 'Isa ibn Maryam (2: 87, 253; 5: 110, 19: 17 *biruhi al-Qudusi*) even though Moses also performed miracles and the Prophet Muhammad also clearly came into contact with Gabriel/Jibril. This is an argument that should lead to a reconsideration of the narrative on this association and its interpretation. Logically, if Gabriel is *ruh al-Qudus* why is this attribution only related to 'Isa ibn Maryam, while for Moses and Muhammad, the same association with Gabriel-as *ruh al-Qudus* is not emphasized? Why is the association in the Qur'an between the "Prophets" with the *ruh al-Qudus* highlighted in reference to the only Prophet to whom the *ruh al-Qudus* is also attributed, but in a different religion as Christianity? It is plausible that the concept of the Holy Spirit as *ruh al-Qudus*, passing through osmosis during the canonization process of the Qur'an, was Islamicised through this kind of interpretation, an interpretation that is unable to clarify the incongruity reported above.

3. Jesus Christ and Monoenergism/Monothelitism. The Qur'an's Christology through the Christian Christological Debates

It is important in this section to reflect on the possible roots of the Qur'an's Christology, more specifically, to identify the probable influence that the 7th century debate on the nature of Christ (in Christianity) had on the *milieu* of the Islamic revelation and its process of canonization at the end of the same century and the beginning of the 8th. As stated in the introduction, the Qur'an was not free and isolated from its historical background: verses 30: 2–7 directly refer to the last Roman-Persian war, which presumably ended 4 years before the death of the Prophet Muhammad; sura 105 seems to refer to historical events related to the Ethiopian invasion of Himyar in the 6th century, (although more recent but preliminary studies seem to doubt this⁶); sura 18: 83–89 98 referred to Dhu l'Qarnayn which, without a clear identification of who it was, probably referred to a historical figure, Alexander the Great (Van Blanden 2008, pp. 175–203), the Parthian king Kisrounis, the Lakhmide king al-Mudhir ibn Imru al-Qays etc.

Other linguistic-historical aspects emphasize how the Islamic revelation is clearly related to a cultural geographical *milieu* with a complex combination of Arabian Paganism, Abrahamic roots and late antiquity (Sinai 2017, pp. 59–72; Reynolds 2008; Donner 2006, pp. 23–75) of which Quranic Christology was certainly an interesting aspect.

According to this methodological approach, the Qur'an's Christology, from my point of view, reflects not only the impact of peculiar Jewish Christians' Christologies (Crone 2015, 2016), but the complexity and the incoherence of intra-Christian debates of the 7th century, in particular those which emerged under the Emperor Heraclius (610–641), namely the monoenergism-monothelitism debate.

The Emperor and the Patriarch Sergius I of Constantinople made a clear attempt to reconcile the different Christological positions that had deeply fragmented the Christian community after the Council of Chalcedon (451), during which the discussion on the natures of Christ officially declared the two natures of Jesus (divine and human) in one person, *hypostasis*, or, to put it simply, that in Jesus there is the coexistence of two natures united in one person (Price et al. 2014, p. 87ff).

This Ecumenical Council had effectively caused the fragmentation of the community, provoking the *miaphysitism* separation of those that believed in Jesus, the "Incarnate word of God", and his nature as fully divine and fully human (one *physis*); the Coptic church of

Alexandria and the Syriac church of Antioch, two of the main centres of early Christianity assumed this position.

At the earlier Council of Ephesus (431), the archbishop of Constantinople Nestorius (d. 450 ca) had refused the hypostatic union, supporting the clear idea of the separate natures of Jesus, the divine and the human, as well as the idea that Maryam could not be considered *Theotokos* “God-bearer,” in contrast with Orthodoxy (Kung 1997).

Following this internal fragmentation, it is also important to underline how the huge majority of the Christianized Arabs of the Near East assumed an un-orthodox Christological position; the Nestorian position for the majority of those who lived under the Persian rulers and the Monophysites for those under the Byzantines: I refer here to those Arab confederations of Lakhmides and Ghassanides who assumed in late antiquity an increasing political and religious role in both empires (Fisher 2015, p. 276ff.; Genequand and Robin 2015; Demichelis 2021, pp. 15–39).

When the Emperor Heraclius ended his victorious campaign against the Persians (628), he once again focused his attention on Christological issues with the clear intention of bridging the internal Christian fragmentation, reaching a sort of theological agreement with the Churches of Antioch and Alexandria despite the opposition of the new Patriarch of Jerusalem Sophronius (d. ca 638), who rejected the Monoenergism doctrine, considering it closely related to monophysitism. After Sophronius’ death in around 638, Heraclius tried to modify the Christological formula, by emphasizing the theory of the two natures of Christ, with two different energies, but with a unique will, assuming that Jesus’ human attitude is understandable, but is never in antithesis with his divine will and actions, which always remained predominant: this is a facet that seems to emerge in the Quranic revelation (as we will see later).

In this case, it would have been the Pope of Rome, Severinus and his successor, John IV, who rejected the new doctrine as it was clearly in contrast with the Council of Chalcedon (Price et al. 2014, p. 18ff.; Hovorun 2008, p. 5ff.).

In spite of this, the monoenergetic-monotheism debate clearly did not start a few years before the Arab conquests, on the contrary, it was since the late 4th century that Christian Christology had been trying to solve the complexity of Jesus’ human and divine nature. The main difference in the 7th century was that now the long Roman-Persian war (602–628) and the subsequent Arab conquests had further fragmented the Christian community, while Heraclius’ strategy to theologically reunify the different perspectives also had a clear theological and political goal (Price et al. 2014, p. 18ff.; Ostrogorsky 1993, pp. 94–96; Kaegi 1992, p. 210ff.).

However, the theoretical idea of the domination by the divine part over his human and life-related spirit, in which the whole life of Isa’ ibn Maryam is concentrated, is cognitive content that derives from a neo-Platonic *spectrum*, distinguishing Jesus’ body from his sensitive (*psyche*) and intellectual soul (*nous*).

Apollinaris of Laodicea (d. 382) argues that the divine Word was acquired by his human nature, the *body*, and the *sensitive soul* only, but not exclusively, by the *intellectual soul*, because for him in the union in Jesus of the two natures, the human would diminish the perfection of the divine.

In fact, he argues, sin must exist in a complete man, a sinful attitude that derives from the will, but also from the spirit; therefore, to save Christ’s impeccability, it is necessary to eliminate the intellectual soul. In other words, Jesus is unable to elaborate personal intellectual thought in contrast with the divine will, which is another aspect that seems particularly evident in the Islamic revelation.

His thesis was presumably confirmed by the verse of John the Apostle and Evangelist, “the Word became flesh (1:14)”, which Apollinaris interprets in the strict sense of *body* and *psyche*.

However, the Bishop of Laodicea also made a clear distinction between Christ’s divine *energeia*⁷ and his human actions. The former is pure and sinless, the latter weak, passive, and subject to sin, suffering and death (Hovorun 2008, pp. 7–8).

“Thus, the *energeia* of the flesh, in comparison with the activity of the Godhead, is not *energeia*, but a passive movement initiated by the divinity. [. . .] According to this understanding, the unity is not static, but dynamic and lively. Christ is one because he has one life and one power, which proceeds from the Godhead and imbues humanity. Apollinarius equates this life of Christ with the *energeia*, which, it follows, is not simply an activity, but also a life-giving power of the Godhead. In this way, Christ’s human actions cannot be termed *energeia*, but merely movements. Apollinarius went further and asserted that the *energeia* of the Logos substituted his human soul and mind. [. . .] Another important element of Apollinarius’ argument was that of will. Christ has only one will, as well as one nature and one *energeia*.”

The bishop of Laodicea proposed a single Christ with a unique nature, will and *energeia* which clearly emerged in the miracles and in the *Passio*. The will is single and divine because closely associated with the single and divine *nous* that was created by God himself in insufflating it in Maryam’s womb. This is quite close to the Qur’anic Christology, isn’t it?

The Antiochian tradition, with Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. ca 428/429) is believed to have started from Apollinarius’ assumption moving forward in the attempt to better balance the human and divine willpower of Christ in relation to its two natures. It is evident that Qur’anic Christology reports nothing about Jesus’s humanity, except to assert that he is not the son of God.

This is the peculiarity of the Islamic revelation in relation to Isa’ ibn Maryam: if in the Qur’an, apart from the absolute denial of Jesus’ filiation, all the above information emphasizes Isa’s specialness, Christian Christology continued in the 5–7th centuries to argue and re-assess the logical and rational difficulties in framing Christ’s complexity.

With Theodore of Mopsuestia, the human nature of Jesus regains real physical human life and ability to act and will; moreover, in the Qur’an, it is Jesus’ birth from the Virgin Mary, the assumption that he gains the Word and a Spirit of God and that he used both in performing miracles, as well as the idea that he did not die on the Cross, that established his complexity.

On the contrary, regarding Isa’ ibn Maryam’s human nature, the probable existence of a male partner of Maryam (Joseph, which is also quite logical for the historical period in question), the existence of Jesus’ brothers (Mr 3: 31–34; 6:3–4; Mt 12: 46–50, 13: 55–56; Lu 8: 19–21) or that Jesus worked as a carpenter for much of his life, as a human being, did not emerge in the Islamic revelation at all, plausibly because it was not central to the Qur’anic narrative.

Contrary to what one might think, Qur’an Christology is really more prone to recognizing the abnormality of Jesus’ prophetic path and divine relation with God than denying it: the divinity of Jesus is indeed widely rejected, but its special nature has never been explained or contextualized; on the contrary, as argued by G. S. Reynolds (2009, pp. 237–58), Islamic Christology has been adapted to assume an anti-Christian approach in the attempt to stress Christian inconsistencies and incoherence.

Unlike the debate that Severus of Antioch (d. 538) opposed, and the position previously held by Pope Leo I (d. 461), Nestorius (d. 450) Eutyches (d. 456) etc. who supported the existence of two natures and two *energeia* in Christ, the Patriarch of Antioch, assuming a clear monotheistic *visio*, proposed that the single *energeia* would have been the only way to preserve the condition of Christ’s unity.

This position would have been made more complex in relation to Isa’ ibn Maryam’s suffering and death on the cross, as well as the Gospel’s sentence: “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done” (Luke 22: 42) which is similarly reported by Mark 14: 36, “Abba, Father, he said “everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will” and Matthew 26: 39, “Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from

me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.”, which amplify the Christological problems in relation to the separation and independence of Jesus and God’s will.

These are passages that the Qur’an completely ignores, but which coherently stress the unitary *visio* of the Islamic revelation about the peculiarity of Jesus who, as a servant of God, is allowed to carry out actions that are not normally human.

4. Jesus ibn Maryam in the Qur’an: Divinity and Humanity

According to pre-Islamic Christological complexity, the monoenergists deprived Jesus’ human nature of its proper operational activity, highlighting that it was reduced to an utterly passive instrument manipulated by divine operation.

“Some texts certainly give this impression, such as the *Ekthesis* of 636: ‘At no time did his intellectually ensouled flesh make its natural movement separately and of its own impulse in opposition to the bidding of God the Word [. . .] but when, how, and to the extent that God the Word himself resolved’ (p. 229 below). But the advocates of orthodox dyoenergism said exactly the same. To cite Sophronius of Jerusalem: ‘Having become a human being, he accepted what was human voluntarily [. . .] when and to the extent that he willed it.’ Or take Pope Martin in the Lateran Acts: ‘He allowed these wholly blameless emotions to be excited in him according to his will’ (p. 372 below). Such passages should surely be taken to assert not that the human nature lacked all spontaneity, but that the divine will retained overall control and was able to suspend, at will, the natural human operation, as when (for example) Christ walked on water without sinking.” (Price et al. 2014, p. 89)

If on the one hand, this resolved the complexity of Jesus’ evangelic spontaneity in asking God “to not take this cup” (Mr 14:36; Mat 26:42; Lu 22:42), on the other hand, Isa’ ibn Maryam’s divine will is able to keep control over his body.

It is therefore evident that on the Christian side, the concrete conflict between monoenergists and dyoenergists was more related to terminology or different political issues rather than to concrete substance. [Maximus the Confessor](#) (1865, d. 662, EP 19, PG 91, 593A) effectively made an affirmation in which he clarified the existence of two natural operations, united in Christ to form one theandric operation, a joint human and divine *energeia*.

This is probably what osmotically passed into the Qur’an, at least, on a constitutive level: Isa’ ibn Maryam is born from a woman as a normal human being, but his spirit and word came from above.

The Isa’ ibn Maryam who died on the cross is the one with the human nature and a physical body; on the contrary, God’s spirit and word have been raised up by God himself as presumably maintained in the Qur’an (4:157–59).

If this kind of interpretation is hard to prove, the same needs to be related to the interpretation by exegeses who have usually seen this passage as closely linked to an eschatological dimension: “[. . .] Jesus’ death in the Last Days when he will have returned to earth, killed the Antichrist (*Dajjal*), lived for a while and then died a natural death. Then he will be buried next to Muhammad, with whom he shall rise on the Day of Resurrection.” (Lawson 2009, pp. 40–41).

Al-Tabari (d. 922) interpreted the above verses with: “to take from Earth and raise to the heavens” assuming a position that would be held by al-Maturidi (d. 944) also, Jesus’ death is postponed until after the second coming: “I will take you and raise you to myself, to the day of Resurrection: then you shall return onto me” (Maturidi 2020, vol. 3. pp. 45ff.). The Mu’tazilite al-Zamakhshari supported the idea that “Jesus will die a normal death after his victory against the Antichrist, not by the hand of the non-believers” (Zamakhshari 2016, vol. 1. p. 145), while, on the contrary, the Andalusí Ibn ‘Atiyya (d. 1152) argues that ‘Isa ibn Maryam will die a second time after his fall to Earth to defeat the *Dajjal*.’ (‘Atiyya 1977, vol. 3, p. 105). Finally, al-Razi (d. 1209) offered his own interpretation, arguing that God said “I will make your life complete and then take your soul. I shall not leave you in their hands

to kill you. I will raise you to my heavens and place you next to my angels. They will not have the possibility to kill you because I will protect you.” (Razi 1990, vol. 2, p. 100). Thus, it almost seems that God decided, as reported in the Qur’an, to bring Jesus to a different place but still on Earth to give him the possibility of naturally ending his life, with the Jews not realizing they had crucified a different person. Only afterwards will God raise Jesus’ soul to the heavens with his second coming at the end of time. More contemporary authors such as Rida and ‘Abduh (1947) accepted the literal meaning of death, while Jesus’ soul ascended to God; the same position is accepted by M. Shaltut, who in his commentary argues that ‘Isa ibn Maryam’s death is related to Jesus’ strong spiritual status and that his body becoming energy allowed him to ascend to the heavens through God’s permission (Shaltut 1960, p. 176). However, this issue is not so well explained, and risks being very confusing.

According to this, if Jesus’ eschatological dimension started to be elaborated in the Islamic milieu in the 8–9th centuries, the assertion that Isa’ ibn Maryam’s humanity was annihilated on the cross, contrary to his divine spirit, seems clearly in contrast with the assumption that Jesus is, like other men, susceptible to physical death.

However, two main linguistic aspects need to be considered in this analysis; the first reflects on the translation of *Shubbiha lahum*, from the root *sh-b-h*, the second is *Rafa’ahu*, from the root *r-f-’* (Abdel Haleem 2008, pp. 475–76; 374–75).

The first word’s most frequent meaning has usually been translated as *to be similar or identical* in a verbal III form, while the active participle of the VIII form would have the meaning of *alike, likewise*. However, if a contemporary text such as A. Haleem’s Arabic-English dictionary of Qur’anic usage (Abdel Haleem 2008, pp. 474–75) adopts: *they did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but it (the crucifixion, but also interpreted as he, Isa’ ibn Maryam) was made to appear like that to them*, the Qur’anic verse context, which referred to the Jews as killers of their prophets (4:155) also continues with: “those that disagreed about him are full of doubt, with no knowledge to follow, only supposition: they certainly did not kill him”, which clarifies how the problem in relation to Jesus’ death and subsequent resurrection (suggested in the following verse) framed many doubts in the Jewish community, causing its inner fragmentation with the formation of a new sect and subsequent global religion that Christianity became in the following centuries.

It is Jesus’ resemblance indeed that is under analysis, because, in relation to *Rafa’ahu*, to rise, to elevate, but also to glorify, to exalt, to honour, is usually used in the Qur’an in relation to something that is not physical (Q. 12:100; 49: 2; 55:7; 19:57).

The same verb is also used in 3:55:

“God said, Jesus, I will take you back (*inni Mutawaffika*) and raise up to me (*wa Rafi’uka ‘ilayya*): I will purify you of the disbelievers. To the day of Resurrection I will make those who followed you superior to those who disbelieved. Then you will all return to Me and I will judge between you regarding your differences.”

If, on the one hand, this confirms: “[...]any idea of physical raising is left purely to the imagination. And such an imagination, in light of the English translation chosen by Pickthall, would need to be particularly inventive in order to arrive at such a conclusion.” (Lawson 2009, p. 56), it stressed another incongruity about Isa’ ibn Maryam’s purification from the disbelievers: *Wa mutahhiruka mina al-ladhina kafaru wa ja’ilu*.

However, let’s go step by step.

As Lawson argues in his work, it took centuries for an anti-anthropomorphic interpretation of this verse to be considered, in parallel with a theological, mystic and philosophical capability to adopt an Aristotelian and neo-Platonic thought before an exegetical change.

However, this aspect is only partially true: al-Muhasibi (d. 857), in the first half of the 9th century, was already able to theorize the process of purification (*tazkiyya an-Nafs*) of the human soul (Smith 1977, pp. 83–85; Demichelis 2018, p. 46ff.) and the early Mu’tazilites discussed God and his attributes (Fakhry 2004).

If Jesus did receive a pure soul from God himself and Maryam is recognized as a virgin, then purification would be unnecessary in relation to this preliminary status that is

confirmed in the Qur'an, but also because there is no concept of original sin in Islam. So, what is the complexity that makes Isa' ibn Maryam such a singular prophet in the Qur'an?

When John of Damascus (d. 749) wrote *The Fount of Knowledge*, the second part of chapter 101 was on the *Heresy of the Ishmaelites*, we are certainly in the first half of the 8th century and in the last thirty years of his life.

Having lived at the court of Damascus as well as being a son/nephew of administrative figures who worked for the Byzantines and the Umayyads in the previous two generations, there is no doubt that John was a prominent figure in understanding Qur'anic Christology. However, as shown in Najib G. Awad, *Umayyad Christianity* (Awad 2018, p. 243ff.) John of Damascus' understanding of Islam is far from being "truly encyclopaedic", and lacks an objective presentation of the content of Islamic faith, with incorrect information on the name of *suras* and the Islamic dogmatic creed and lacking a precise identification of preliminary Islamic *Kalam*. In relation to Qur'anic Christology, he says:

[. . .] that there exists one God maker of all, who was neither begotten nor has he begotten. He says that Christ is the Word of God, and his spirit, created and a servant, and that he was born without a seed from Mary, the sister of Moses and Aaron (*a clear inconsistency*). For he says, the word of God and the spirit entered Mary and she gave birth to Jesus who was a prophet and a servant of God. And that the Jews, having themselves violated the law, wanted to crucify him and after they arrested him they crucified his shadow, but Christ himself, they say, was not crucified nor did he die; for God took him up to himself into heaven because he loved him. And this is what he says, that when Christ went up to the heavens God questioned him saying: "Oh Jesus, did you say that I am son of God, and God? And Jesus, they say, answered: Be merciful to me, Lord, you know that I did not say so, nor will I boast that I am your servant; but men who have gone astray wrote that I made this statement and they said lies against me and they have been in error. And God, they say, answered to him: I know that you would not say this thing." (Sahas 1972, pp. 133, 135)

If, on the one hand, this analysis seems to be made on tiptoe in order not to trigger a political conflict with the Islamic authority, as suggested by Najib G. Awad, in a new phase of growing assimilative inter-religious conflict between the Muslims of the Umayyad empire (after 'Abd al-Malik's caliphate) and the local Christian world, on the other hand, the information included summarizes what Islam has elaborated about Christ. This information, present also in an earlier letter written by Jacob of Edessa (d 708) to John the Stylite (d. ca 737/738) suggests that if the Muslims disagree with the Christians' claim that Jesus is the "son of God," he concurs that:

"They nevertheless confess firmly that he is the true Messiah who was to come and who was foretold by the prophets; on this they have no dispute with [the Christians] . . . they say to all at all times that Jesus is, the word of God, they also add, in their ignorance, that he is the spirit of God, for they are not able to distinguish between word and spirit, just as they do not assent to call the Messiah God or son of God." (Hoyland 1997, pp. 165–66)

This highlights the clarity of the Qur'an on this assumption: God had no sons, but also the incapacity of early Islam to develop a deeper analysis about the peculiarity of Isa' ibn Maryam's status and natures.

This is the core of the Quranic Christological inquiry: in the Qur'an, Islam interprets Isa' ibn Maryam's peculiarity emphasizing the well-known "metaphysical" facets already considered, nevertheless, his full humanity is widely supported, stressing the Islamic contrariness to the status of "son". However, and different from the canonical Gospels, Jesus' humanity in the Islamic revelation is univocally corroborated by the negation of God's filiation, without any further consideration about his human emotive qualities; fear, disgust, fits of rage, mercy, joy etc., and which evidently shaped John of Damascus' theological considerations on the new faith.

In parallel, the peculiarity of the Islamic narrative on Jesus continued to provoke discussion on his eschatological consideration in proto-Sufi and Sufi contexts, but it was probably for political reasons that Isa' ibn Maryam's death on the cross was abhorred at the beginning.

As suggested by Najib G. Awad, the symbol of the Cross had become since the end of the 4th century a prominent icon of suffering, atonement but also salvation and redemption for Christian communities; however, following the process of Arabization and Islamization that impacted the Umayyad empire after the second *fitna* (680–692) and started with the caliphate of 'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan (d. 706) and his successors, worship of the Cross became a huge topic of disapproval and conflict between Christians and Muslims, which was absent in the Sufyanid phase (Schick 1995, p. 164) and emerged in the Marwanid period (Griffith 2008) suggesting a pre-iconoclastic symbol of conflict. It is therefore evident that in relation to the historical *milieu* which developed in the Umayyad and early 'Abbasid eras, the former interpretation related to the Qur'anic passages of 4:157–59 and the assumption of a concrete analysis on the Islamic Christological understanding about these verses remained unclear, while we need to wait for the elaboration of an Islamic eschatology and prophet-ology to consider Isa' ibn Maryam's role (Lawson 2009, p. 63ff.), a task that would have been dissociated from an iconoclastic debate.

The former eschatological role of Isa' ibn Maryam in other Qur'anic verses: 43:57–61, is even more complicated because they seem to refer to a preliminary Meccan phase, in which Muhammad's consideration for Jesus was well represented.

“When the son of Mary is cited as example, your people (probably Meccan polytheists) laugh and jeer, saying, Are our gods better or him? They cite him only to challenge you: they are a contentious people, but he is only a servant We favoured and made an example for the Children of Israel: if it had been Our will, We could have made you angels, succeeding one another on earth. This (Jesus or the Qur'an) is knowledge for the Hour: do not doubt it. Follow me for this is the right path.”

This verse is clearly difficult to interpret but it can give us another insight into the complexity of Qur'anic Christology. If Jesus's hermeneutical coherence with 4:157–59 has been built up on this verse in assuming an Islamic Messianic-Apocalyptic understanding, concerning the second coming of Isa' ibn Maryam to the earth as a precursor of the *yawm ad-Din*, this verse “historically” stressed Mohammad's great consideration for Jesus as a Servant of God, contrasting him with the Meccan divinities (Bausani 2001, pp. 651–51).

“When Jesus came with clear signs he said, ‘I have brought you wisdom’ (*qala qad ji'tukum bil-hikmati*); I have come to clear up some of your differences for you. Be mindful of God and obey me (*fihī fa'attaqu Allaha wa 'Ati'uni*): God is my Lord and your Lord. Serve Him: this is the straight path (*'Inna Allaha huwa Rabbi wa Rabbukum. Fa buduhu. Hadha siratun Mustaqimun*) (Q. 43: 63–64).

The above verses, which followed the previous ones about Isa' ibn Maryam's eschatological role, established Jesus as a Vicar of God on the earth: obey me [. . .] God is your and my Lord [. . .] this is the straight path which, also referring to 43: 57–61, underlined how Isa' ibn Maryam will be the Vicar of the afterlife on an ongoing God's eschatological vision.

“If it had been Our will, We could have made you angels, succeeding one another on earth”, just as God was able to generate Jesus without a father. (Abdel Haleem 2008, p. 494)

Consequently, it is plausible to think that Qur'anic Christology adopts a syncretic status in which monoenergism and Arianism played a significant role: on one hand, Isa' ibn Maryam is a full human being born from Maryam's womb (although the absence of a father continues to be problematic), on the other hand, all Jesus's Quranic actions, *ahadith* and concepts are divinely moved by his tongue and body, emphasizing the predominance

of his intellectual “divine” soul and the absence of Jesus’ *psyche* in the Qur’an: the lack of Jesus’ inner human will is the truly problematic aspect that reflects on the difficulties in interpreting his peculiar role in Islam.

In the Christian monoenergetic interpretation, God’s will is evidently predominant over Jesus’s doubts, when they are expressed close to his physical crucifixion (in the garden of Gethsemane); contrariwise to Arianism which did not consider Jesus’ nature as divine, Quranic Christology described in its verses the active and spiritual abnormality of Isa’ ibn Maryam’s nature only without being able to solve it.

Only a century later, *Kalam* should have been able to consider and add a possible interpretative key in continuity with this previous one.

5. ‘Isa ibn Maryam and *Kalam*

The theoretical disputes on God’s essence (*dhat*) and attributes (*sifat*) had had a significant impact on the Islamic understanding of *Tawhid* (divine unity) and Transcendence (*tanzih*) since the second half of the 8th century, developing different and sometimes extremist doctrinal positions which could be helpful in this study to better understand the complexity of Qur’anic Christology.

The Mu’tazilite school and its opponents played a significant role in trying to interpret the Qur’anic passages in which God’s anthropomorphism emerged literally in the verses: 7: 54; 20: 5; 55: 27; 38: 75 etc. and in which God is seated on the Throne, has face or created inanimate entities with His hands.

The rational school rejected the theory of the existence of a series of eternal attributes in God emphasizing his unity; however, in the attempt to save the Qur’anic anthropomorphic (*mujasam*) and metaphoric (*majazi*) symbolism of a personal deity, *Kalam* also needed to recognize and rationalize the same attributes, in particular those referring to His power (*qudra*), knowledge (*‘ilm*), life (*hayat*) etc.

Al-Ash’ari in his *Maqalat* (Ash’ari 1963, pp. 156–157, 483–86), described the Mu’tazilite theoretical approach, arguing that God’s power is an expression of his essence, as well as being eternally powerful, knowing, living and so on.

If, on the one hand, this kind of approach preserved God’s unity, on the other hand, the Mu’tazila denied his transcendence in being the essence of the people’s worship, devotion, request for piety etc., God risked becoming distantly perceived by the believers as the Beneficent, the Almighty, the Merciful, the Avenger, the Just etc. in contrast with the many Qur’anic verses that confirm the contrary: 52:28; 3: 28; 4: 106 etc. (El-Bizri 2008, pp. 122–24).

In other words, the Mu’tazila, in saving strict Islamic monotheism, denied what men need from a divinity: an emotional refuge of absolute understanding.

In the attempt to recalibrate this theological approach, the Mu’tazilites Abu’l-Hudhail (d. 842), and an-Nazzam (d. 845) made a distinction between God’s essential and active attributes:

“In accord with the rejection of the concept of the eternal attributes, many of them made the semantic concession which amounted to admitting the eternity of these attributes but not their distinctness from God. [. . .] Essential attributes such as life, power and knowledge are such that their opposites could not be affirmed of God, [. . .] Active attributes, on the other hand, such as love, will, munificence, speech, mercy, justice, could be affirmed or denied of God.”, (Ash’ari 1963, p. 187)

Thus, they established the idea that the latter attributes are not essential to our understanding of God, as well as not belonging eternally to Him.

Controversies clearly emerged on this aspect of this theoretical approach, in relation to God’s will, for example, but in particular relation to God’s speech which is especially interesting for our analysis. As reported by M. Fakhry (2004, pp. 62–63):

“Furthermore, the Christological controversies, of which we encounter distinct echoes in the treatise of *Kalam*, apparently contributed to the articulate formu-

lation of the problem of the Word of God, which not unnaturally the Muslim theologians identified with the Koran. And it is significant that the adversaries of the Mu'tazilah frequently castigated them for having borrowed their belief in the creation of the Koran from the Christians, who believed that the Word of God could become incarnate in a creature, i.e., Jesus Christ, whereas the Mu'tazilah denounced these critics for believing the Koran, to be, like Christ, the eternal word of God."

On the contrary, the Mu'tazilah, who considered God's speech not eternal, denied the Qur'an everlasting status arguing that it was created. This assumption would have provoked rationalist debates concerning the distinction between human and divine speech: the inspired (*wahy*) word of God perceived by Muhammad during his phases of isolation on the mountains around Mecca, passed through a creative human process in a book (Ash'ari 1963, p. 598; Shaharastani 1892, p. 34) to become something that every human being can read.

However, going back to the previous Christological assumption, al-Ash'ari (d. ca 936) in his *Al-Ibanah 'An Usul ad-Diyanah* (Ash'ari 1940, pp. 68–69) replied that just as God cannot create his will in any created thing, He cannot create his Word in any created thing either. "Likewise, it is impossible for God to create His word in a created thing, because that created thing would have to be the speaker of it, and it is impossible for the word of God to be a word belonging to a created thing."

This is a rational reply based on a logical assumption. Ash'arism, nevertheless, established a precise distinction between the attributes of action (*sifat al-fi'l*) and those of the essence (*sifat al-nafs*): the former come to be when God wants to do something and acts, the latter are an expression of the impossibility of God's contrariness because the negation of his Omniscience, for example, would mean that God is ignorant. The identification by Ash'arism of these attributes of the essence are: *'ilm* (omniscience), *qudra* (power), *hayat* (life), *basar* (sight), *irada* (will), *sam'* (hearing) and *kalam* (speech), which in referring to Qur'anic Christology remains problematic.

Al-Ash'ari argues that: "God is not in His creatures nor are His creatures in Him" (Ash'ari 1947, p. 9; Allard 1965, p. 199) refuting the equivalence between divine essence and divine attributes, but the Qur'an states in 3: 45–47 that: "The angels said, 'Mary, God gives you news of a Word from Him (*bikalamatin minhu*), whose name will be the Messiah (*al-Masih*), Jesus, son of Mary, who will be held in honour in this world and the next (*fi ad-Dunya wa al-'Akhira*) [. . .] She said, 'My Lord, how can I have a son when no man has touched me?' (*Qalat Rabbi 'Anna Yakunu Li Waladun Wa Lam Yamsasni Basharun*) [The angel] said, 'This is how God creates what He will: when He has ordained something, He only says, "Be", and it is."

Isa' ibn Maryam is a singular Word from God that will continue to be honoured in this world and in the following, the afterlife, but also that God created this "strange entity, as Jesus is, because he willed it. In other words, God willed to empower Isa' ibn Maryam as described in the Qur'an, and logically it is God's will that will strengthen Jesus with the Holy Spirit (*ruh al-qudus*) (Q. 2: 87, 252: 5: 110): an agent of divine action and communication (we have already discussed the interpretation of the Holy Spirit as the Angel Gabriel).

We will return to the Holy Spirit later; al-Ash'ari in fact in the *Kitab al-Luma* (Ash'ari 1947, pp. 30–31) argues that God's speech can be eternal but also temporarily produced:

"[. . .] so if God's speech is temporarily produced, then God produced either in Himself, or as self-subsistent, or in another. But God cannot produce it in himself because it is not a substrate (*mahall*) for produced things. And he cannot produce things for self-subsistence, because it is an attribute, and an attribute cannot subsist in itself. And he cannot produce it in another, for if He produced it in another, the body containing the speech would have to derive from the most distinctive quality of the speech a name for the speech itself and a name for the whole to which the locus of the speech would belong. So, if the most

distinctive quality of the speech were its being “speech”, that body would have to be speaking; [. . .] Hence, since another cannot speak by God’s speech, [. . .] God cannot produce speech in another in such wise that He himself would be speaking thereby. Therefore, since it is impossible to allow the alternatives of which one would have to be realized if God’s speech were temporarily produced, it is certain that God’s speech is eternal and that by it God has ever been speaking.”

In his Pindaric reasoning, this is in contradiction with 3:45: a Word from Him.

However, in the following question of the *Kitab al-Luma*, al-Ash’ari’s analysis goes forward (Ash’ari 1947, p. 31): “May not God produce in another an act, a favour, a bounty, a benefit and a substance, so that He himself is thereby acting, generous, bountiful, benefiting and sustaining? Why, then, do you deny He may produce in another a speech by which He himself would be speaking?”

Isa’ ibn Maryam seems to be the keystone of the entire discussion.

In the reply, al-Ash’ari denied this eventuality, assuming that God cannot create his Speech in another only because his Speech cannot be compared with that of a normal creature. Nevertheless, al-Ash’ari in this analysis demonstrates being aware of the complexity of the denied transmission of “power” between God and one of his creatures: “For if the favour, bounty, benefit, and act be power, that body must be powerful” (Ash’ari 1947, p. 31). At the same time, if God’s original Speech cannot be compared with that of a human creature, on the other hand, it is only through Speech comprehensible by human beings that God can speak to his creatures. This reasoning is at the base of Qur’anic Christology. Ash’ari’s distinction between the created nature of utterances (*huduth al-alfaz*) and the eternalness of their meanings (*qidam al-ma’ani*) emphasizes the difference between God’s speech as inherent in Him, but also understandable to Him only, from the sensory sound, meaning and graphic trace that transformed God’s incomprehensible speech into a comprehensible one for human beings. The former is uncreated and eternal, the latter is created (El-Bizri 2008, pp. 130–31).

Qur’anic Christology is clearly included in the *Kalam* debate on God’s attributes, with al-Ash’ari trying to clarify the debate on God’s speech and he continued to raise doubts without effective solutions, and which cannot concretely be solved by a logical reply:

“This proof of the eternity of God’s speech is also the proof of the eternity of God’s willing. For if His willing was temporarily produced, it would have to be produced by God either in Himself, or in another, or as self-subsistent. But God cannot produce it in Himself, because He is not a substrate for produced things; and He cannot produce it as self-subsistent, because it is an attribute, and an attribute cannot subsist in itself, [. . .]; and He cannot produce it in another, because this would make it necessary for that other to be willing by God’s willing. Therefore, since it is impossible to allow these alternatives of which one have to be realized if God’s willing was temporarily produced, it is certain that God’s willing is eternal, and that by it God has ever been willing.” (Ash’ari 1947, p. 132)

This is almost a contradiction: if the Speech of God is eternal but at different times in human history has been clarified in different languages for human beings—in the Torah, Gospels and the Qur’an—it is clear that it has been God’s temporary will to make Isa’ ibn Maryam’s life very peculiar in comparison with other human beings: this will was temporarily expressed in history, but has possibly been in God from the beginning. It is not for us to know.

6. Conclusions

Summing up the above complexity, it is important to consider that Quranic Christology remained fragmented into two main assumptions: the humanity of Isa’ ibn Maryam, but also his special nature.

If the former is univocally represented by the fact that Jesus is not God’s son, the latter, as clarified above, is amply investigated in underlying the miraculous and illogical postu-

lates attributed to him, from his childhood to adulthood. The Islamic revelation stresses how Isa' ibn Maryam's actions, including his death, are partially incomprehensible because they are attributed to a will that makes him perform actions linked to a metaphysical entity.

Is it the result of having been strengthened by the Holy Spirit from his birth? Without assuming the plurality of the Sufi understanding of the *Ruh al-Quds*, is the Holy Spirit an attribute of God, essence of God or an attribute of the essence of God?

If *Ruh al-Quds* is a created agent of God, it is also an immortal essential soul (*nafs*) that in this specific case was donated by God himself to Isa' ibn Maryam when he was still in his mother's womb.

In other words, the Qur'an confirms some of the assumptions that makes Jesus' nature very complex. If Isa' ibn Maryam is a Word and a Spirit from God (4: 171), it is evident that Qur'anic Christology predominantly considers the divine essence that is actively present in his human body: the only actions that are reported in the Qur'an about Jesus are those linked to his divine active and spiritual inspiration and that allowed him to perform miracles. According to the Qur'an, the humanity of Isa' ibn Maryam is almost not considered in the Islamic revelation. This argument clearly makes me suppose that there was an influence by the internal Christian debate about the predominance of the divine *energeia* in his human active body, in which the Spirit of God and his will are predominant in Jesus' human one.

In parallel, the *Kalam* debate on God's attributes, if denying that God's will and speech "[...] cannot produce it in another, because this would make it necessary for that other to be willing by God's willing", is in contradiction to the Qur'an, when the Islamic revelation recites (3:45): "Mary, God gives you news of a Word from Him (*bikalimatin minhu*), whose name will be the Messiah (*al-Masih*), Jesus, son of Mary, who will be held in honour in this world and the next (*fi ad-Dunya wa al-'Akhira*)" and (4: 171), "the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, was nothing more than a messenger of God, His Word directed to Mary, and a spirit from Him", which clearly makes Isa' ibn Maryam's words, actions and soul directly and deliberately inspired and framed by God.

In other words, Jesus, in the Qur'an, seems willing by God's will and in this case, unlike the other Abrahamic prophets, Isa' ibn Maryam's will and speech are not univocally inspired (*wahy*) by God, like Moses asking God to: "[...] lift[ing] up my heart and ease my task for me. Untie my tongue so that they understand my words and give me a helper from my family, my brother Aaron, to augment my strength through him." (20:25–33), but are part of his inner essence from when he was in his mother's womb.

As reported in M. Beaumont's analysis in *Early Christian interpretation in the Qur'an* (2005b, p. 199) "there is a conviction that the Qur'anic titles 'word and spirit of God' given to Christ can only be interpreted by Muslims as proof of his divine status" which is an unnecessary forcing; on the contrary, it would be enough to consider and to solve the Islamic dilemma about that: "God needs to be considered weak if he allowed a prophet to die (on the cross), but he might be thought of as weak if Christ was equal to Him in status" (Beaumont 2005b, p. 201).

Islamic thought does not consider Jesus the saviour of the world, nor does it conceive of the invention of original sin; moreover, it is evident that the Qur'an, probably influenced by the internal Christian Christological debates of the 6–7th centuries, in particular in relation to the predominance of Jesus' divine nature over the human one, has kept this peculiarity in its revelation. This feature, independent of his fatherless carnal status, also stressed Isa' ibn Maryam's facets in Islam.

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Notes

- ¹ Many insights of these verses seem to be a direct echo of the proto-Evangelium of James (proto-Gospel literature established in the 2nd century BCE) which reached the oral milieu of the Qur'anic genesis when the early Islamic community started to develop its revelation in the pre-canonical form. (Reck 2014, pp. 355–83)
- ² Evangelical passages on the healing of the leper (Matthew, 8, 1–4; Mark, 1, 40–45 and Luke 5, 12–16), of a blind man (Matthew 20, 29–34; Mark 10, 46–52; Luke 18, 35–43) and the resurrection of Lazarus (Yohannes 11, 1–44).
- ³ This aspect will be particularly significant in the Kalam' debate on God's attributes and essence and will be discussed in the last section of this article (El-Bizri 2008, pp. 121–40).
- ⁴ I consider this controversy in relation to those authors who over different centuries have engaged in the Islamic-Christian debate; however, today, in a historical critical debate, it should be evident that Adam remained a mythological figure, no different from Prometheus, while Jesus is a historical one, whose information is reported in different sources from Hebrew, Roman and Greek backgrounds.
- ⁵ Q. 21:91, "Remember the one who guarded her chastity. We breathed into her from Our Spirit (*ruhina*) and made her and her son a sign for all people"; Q. 66:12, "Mary, the daughter of Imran. She guarded her chastity, so We breathed (*fanafakhna filhi*) into her from Our Spirit (*ruhina*). She accepted the truth of her Lord's words and Scriptures: she was truly devout."
- ⁶ On this sura please consider the long debate which appeared in Academia.edu: (2) Discussion: The Elephant Sura: Story and Backstory—Academia.edu.
- ⁷ The Greek word *energeia*, for which the Latin is *operatio* and the most common English renderings are 'energy' and 'operation', refers to the activity and movement of a particular nature or individual and the changes it either effects or experiences. Each essence or nature that exists and can be known to be distinct must have its own distinctive operation (Price et al. 2014, p. 87).

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