

Narrowing Theological Disparities between Moslem and Christian Perspective on Jesus Christ

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Abstrak

Dalam salah satu ayat, Alquran mengidentifikasi umat Kristen sebagai “teman dekat” bagi orang-orang Muslim, dibandingkan dengan umat Yahudi (al-Mâ’idah [5]: 82). Posisi yang diberikan Alquran kepada umat Kristen ini menjadi sangat penting dalam konteks relasi dan dialog antar umat beragama. Artikel ini berusaha menjelaskan titik temu dan persamaan-persamaan antara ajaran Islam dengan doktrin Kristen terkait dengan Yesus, atau ‘Isâ al-Masîh. Tema Kristologi menjadi pilihan pembahasan makalah ini karena Yesus dalam doktrin Kristen menjadi pijakan utama bangunan kristianitas, sementara dalam normatif Islam ia juga mendapat porsi pembahasan yang cukup banyak. Artikel ini bermaksud untuk memberikan pemahaman yang komprehensif terkait dengan pandangan Kristen dan Islam terhadap personalitas dan ajaran Yesus atau Isa Al-Masih. Dalam konteks dialog antar umat beragama, hal tersebut sangat penting bagi kita untuk merundingkan *kalimah sawâ’* (*a common word*) antara Islam dan Kristen. Hal tersebut tidak berarti bahwa kita mencari perbedaan untuk saling menyalahkan, melainkan untuk menyatukan ide yang sama tentang Yesus atau ‘Isâ al-Masîh dalam Kristen maupun Islam. Mengetahui dan memahami Kristologi Islam akan memperkaya pandangan kita mengenai kehidupan Yesus.

Kata kunci: Yesus (Isa Al-Masih), kristologi, dan dialog antaragama.

Introduction

Max Muller (1823-1900) insisted that knowing only one religion means nothing in the context of religious studies. In his famous statement he said, “Who knows one knows none.” In line with this perspective, Hans Kung explains that religion has become one of the important elements in the process of peace-building. In his well-liked book, *Islam: Past, Present and Future*, he asserted that “No peace among the nations without peace among the religions. No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions. No dialogue between the religions without investigation of the foundations of the religions,”¹

Inter-religious dialogue has recently occurred not only as a main topic in the normative debate between religious leaders but also in the process of peace-building and harmony-making among religious people. In 1983, Leonard Swidler declared the “ten commandments” on the ideal approach, that is, should be practiced within inter-religious dialogue. He named it as *the dialogue dicalogue*. The points of these commandments are: 1) The primary purpose of dialogue is to learn, that is, to change and grow in the perception and understanding of reality, and then to act accordingly; 2) Inter-religious or inter-ideological dialogue must be a two-sided project—within each religious or ideological community and between religious or ideological communities; 3) Each participant must come to the dialogue with complete honesty and sincerity; 4) In inter-religious dialogue we must not compare our ideals with our partner’s practice, but rather our ideals with our partner's ideals, our practice with our partner's practice; 5) Each participant must define himself; 6) Each participant must come to the dialogue with no hard-and-fast assumptions as to where the points of disagreement are; 7) Dialogue can take place only between equals; 8) Dialogue can take place only on the basis of mutual trust; 9) Persons entering into inter-religious dialogue must be at least minimally self-critical of both themselves and their own religious or ideological

¹ Hans Kung, *Islam, Past Present & Future* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007), xxiii.

traditions; 10) Each participant eventually must attempt to experience the partner's religion or ideology "from within".²

Swidler gives a very good guidance for the activists of inter-religious dialogue, especially on how to build mutual understanding and mutual respect based on mutual trust. It is important to note that any dialogues prepared and realized without mutual respect will end without meaning. Al-Qur'an stated that Moslem should argue with other believers by using a finest way (*wa jādilhum billatī hiya aḥsan*)³.

Based on this very basic principle on inter-religious dialogue, this paper attempts to elucidate one crucial topic of Christianity, it is Christology. To give a new perspective on this context, this paper will not only explain what Christology in the Christian perspective, but also—and it is the point—what Christology in the Islamic perspective is. Christians believe that Jesus is a very important person in the context of theology. Almost all teachings of Christianity are taken from the history of Jesus' life. Christianity shows that Jesus is a "representative" of God, the Son of God, coming to give spiritual guidance for human being in the world. The Bible is evidence for the very important role of Jesus within Christianity. It portrayed holistically the holy life of Jesus: from his birth to his death and his resurrection. For Christians, it is important to note and assert that Jesus is a historical actor that spreads compassion and religious piety among people.

Christians believe that Jesus is a Christ (*kristus*), a savior. He conveys salvation to all human being accepted His teaching. The history of Jesus is not only personal story but also theology. The role of Jesus Christology is the main teaching within theology of Christianity. It rises from conviction that Jesus came to give *soteria* (salvation) for people. Based on this perspective, the term used to express the teaching of Jesus is Christology not *Jesuology*, Christianity not *Jesuanity*. The term of *Christmas* also strengthens this standpoint which focuses on birth of Christ, a savior, not a Jesus Himself.

² Leonard Swidler, "The Dialogue Decalogue: Ground Rules for Inter-Religious, Inter-Ideological Dialogue", *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 20-1, (1983).

³ QS. An-Nahl [16]:125.

In this context, Christology is the same with soteriology: inseparable. Even though, Christology is more general because it explores the whole history of Jesus whereas soteriology describes only the messianic role of Jesus. According to Groenen (1988), Christology is an effort to conceptualizing life history of Jesus. It means to make Jesus' life (His words and His acts) as ideal values for the mankind. To some extents, this effort is identical with Muslim's attempt to reproduce the Prophet Mohammad life into their activities.

In addition, Islam also appreciates the role of Jesus on giving salvation and spreading compassion among people. Islam recognizes the role of Jesus as a part of prophetic circle which brings *tawhid* (oneness) as the principal teaching. Islam takes Jesus in a very honorable position as a prophet as well as concerns to talk and explain the history of Jesus' life. There are many verses in the Qur'an that reveal Jesus' life: His words, His acts and His miracles. In this point, we can say that Islam has also involved Christology (the history of Jesus) into its belief.

From this perspective, the paper attempts to explore at least three points: (1) how Christians construct their idea of Christology; (2) how Muslims view Jesus' life and build their own Christology; and (3) the conclusion of tightening similarities between these two perspectives.

Christology from within

It is very stimulating when Oscar Cullmann (1963) begins his book, *The Christology of the New Testament*, by differentiating between theology and Christology. Even in Christian community, there is always misunderstanding to comprehend theology and Christology. Cullmann wrote, "If theology is that science whose object is God, then Christology is that science whose object is Christ, his person and his work. Christology is usually considered as a sub-division of theology in the etymological sense. This custom has frequently influenced the historical representation of the first Christians' faith to the extent that one begins by stating their thoughts about God, and speaks only in the second place

of their Christological convictions. That is the usual sequence of the older textbooks of New Testament theology.”⁴

Simply, we can define Christology as a “history of Jesus Christ”, namely His acts and His teachings. This term was acknowledged at the very beginning to answer who is Jesus and what did He do, to know the person, being and activity of him. In his book, *Sejarah Dogma Kristologi: Perkembangan Pemikiran tentang Yesus Kristus pada Umat Kristen*, C. Groenen (1988) explains that Jesus Christ is Christianity itself. The main characteristic of Christianity is based on the position and the role of Jesus. To change the history of Jesus means to change the teachings of Christianity.⁵ However, Groenen realizes that there are too many interpretations and theoretical perspectives within the history of Christianity, concerning with Jesus Christ. It is also about continuity and discontinuity in the history of Jesus life. In his book, Groenen attempts to portray the progress and development of Christology from the very beginning at Jerusalem (the first generation) until the interpretation of Christology according to Indonesian people in the modern era.

When Kevin Madigan (2007) explores the medieval thoughts of the Jesus life in his book, *The Passions of Christ in High-Medieval Thought: An Essay on Christological Development*, he underlines that humanity of Jesus Christ is principally based on the Holy Book, *The New Testament*. It does not only begin and come from medieval university or ancient Christian writings, he wrote, but also refers to the Bible.⁶ It normatively means that Christology has a very strong origin into the text as well as to the context. There are many verses of New Testament which describe humanity aspect of Jesus Christ such as love (John 13:1), compassion (Matthew 9:36), anger (John 2:15-16), grief (John 11:35), sleep (Luke 8:23), hungry (Luke 4:2), etc.

⁴ Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), 7.

⁵ C. Groenen ofm, *Sejarah Dogma Kristologi: Perkembangan Pemikiran tentang Yesus Kristus pada Umat Kristen* (Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 1988), 11.

⁶ Kevin Madigan, *The Passions of Christ in High-Medieval Thought: An Essay on Christological Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 3.

In the other book written by Gerald O'Collins, SJ (2009), *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus*, we can find comprehensive elucidation about Jesus Christ and universal question of Him. Gerald wrote,

“In the light of Christian faith, practice, and worship, that branch of theology called Christology reflects systematically on the person, being, and activity of Jesus of Nazareth (c.5 bc–c.ad 30). In seeking to clarify the essential truths about him, it investigates his person and being (who and what he was/is) and work (what he did/does). Was/is he both human and divine? If so, how is that possible and not a blatant contradiction in terms? Surely we cannot attribute to one and the same subject the attributes of being simultaneously finite (as a human being) and infinite (as Son of God)? Then, should we envisage his revealing and redeeming ‘work’ as having an impact not only on all men and women of all times and places, but also on the whole created cosmos? In any case, can we describe or even minimally explain that salvific ‘work’?”⁷

To holistically draw a “picture” of Christology, probably we can follow what Paul N Anderson (1996) implied in his book, *The Christology of the Fourth Gospel*. In this context, he mentioned five approaches to identify unity/disunity issue within John's Christology. The first approach he wrote is comprehensive overviews approach. The strength of this approach is that it can provide a terse and helpful digest of main Christological themes; but this is also its weakness. Because general surveys are usually concerned to provide an overview, they can seldom go any deeper than a superficial sketch.⁸ The second is text-centered Christological approach. This text centered approach includes the analysis of such aspects as Christological titles, Christological motives, passages which may represent the central structure of Christology, and Christological schemas.⁹ The third is Theological-Christological

⁷ Gerald O'Collins, *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 18.

⁸ Paul N Anderson, *The Christology of the Fourth Gospel: Its Unity and Disunity in the Light of John 6* (Tubingen: Mohr, 1996), 18.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

approaches. As a contrast to text-centered approach, Theological-Christological approaches begin with a particular theological problem emerging from apparent contradictions in the text, or theological difficulties resulting from interpretations. The fourth is Literary-Christological approach. It focuses on one of three interests: the destination and purpose of Christology, diachronic theories of composition, or synchronic analyses of the evangelist's literary artist. The last is Historical-Christological approach. Despite its appeal to objectivity, the very word "historical" is always used rhetorically. It implies a contrast to that which is not "true".¹⁰

Christology is vicinity where humanity and divinity of Jesus Christ will be always discussed. Refer to John 1:14a, *the word became flesh*; Bultmann stated that the emphasis was on humanity of Jesus as needed to be revealer to humanity.¹¹ Accordingly, Christology means to "humanize" and "civilize" the teachings of God into the context of universe. Similar to this point, Islam has purposed its own Christology to "visualize" Jesus Christ as human.

Jesus Christ in the Qur'an

Islamic teachings put the Jesus Christ in the very high position among the prophets. Jesus Christ is one of the five-chosen prophets called by *Ulū al-'Azmi*, the prophet with strong open-mindedness and great patience. They are the Prophet Mohammad, Isa (Jesus), Moses, Abraham and Noah. There are many verses of al-Qur'an which discuss about Jesus' life, His miracles, and His resurrection. Some of these verses are similar with the verses of the Bible and some are different. In this part, I will explore several verses of al-Qur'an on Jesus' life, especially His birth, His miracle, and His crucifixion.

Corresponding to the Bible, al-Qur'an explains in a very detail of Jesus' birth:

¹⁰ Ibid., 29.

¹¹ Pamela E Kinlaw, *Christ Is Jesus: Metamorphosis, Possession, and Johannine Christology* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 6.

Behold! the angels said "O Mary! Allah giveth thee glad tidings of a Word from Him: his name will be Christ Jesus, the son of Mary held in honor in this world and the Hereafter and of (the company of) those nearest to Allah. (45) "He shall speak to the people in childhood and in maturity and he shall be (of the company) of the righteous." (46) She said: "O my Lord! how shall I have a son when no man hath touched me?" He said: "Even so: Allah createth what He willeth; when He hath decreed a plan, He but saith to it 'Be', and it is! (47) And Allah will teach him the Book and Wisdom, the Torah and the Gospel. (48) And (appoint him) a Messenger to the Children of Israel, (with this message): I have come to you with a sign from your Lord, in that I make for you out of clay as it were the figure of a bird, and breathe into it, and it becomes a bird by Allah's leave; and I heal those born blind, and the lepers and I quicken the dead by Allah's leave; and I declare to you what ye eat, and what ye store in your houses. Surely therein is a Sign for you if ye did believe. (49) (I have come to you), to attest the Law which was before me, and to make lawful to you part of what was (before) forbidden to you; I have come to you with a Sign from your Lord. So fear Allah and obey me. (50).¹²

It is only one of the Islamic verses which elucidated that Jesus was born by no-father. It was a "be and it is" (*kun fayakûn*) creation of Allah. In another verse, al-Qur'an also described how the Virgin Mary (Maryam) was fighting by herself on the process of Jesus' birth.

He said: "Nay, I am only a messenger from thy Lord (to announce) to thee the gift of a holy son." (19) She said: "How shall I have a son, seeing that no man has touched me, and I am not unchaste?" (20) He said: "So (it will be): thy Lord saith 'That is easy for Me: and (We wish) to appoint him as a Sign unto men and a Mercy from Us': it is a matter (so) decreed." (21) So she conceived him, and she retired with him to a remote place. (22) And the pains of childbirth drove her to the trunk of a palm-tree: she cried (in her anguish): "Ah! would that I had died before this! Would that I had been a thing forgotten and out of sight!" (23) But (a voice) cried to her from beneath the (palm-tree): Grieve

¹² QS. 'Alî 'Imrân [3]:45-50.

not! for thy Lord hath provided a rivulet beneath thee; (24) And shake towards thyself the trunk of the palm-tree: it will let fall fresh ripe dates upon thee. (25).¹³

Al-Qur'an has also appreciated and explained Jesus' miracles in some verses. Just to give an example, here is QS. al-Mâ'idah [3]:48-51:

And Allah will teach him the Book and Wisdom, the Torah and the Gospel. (48) And (appoint him) a Messenger to the Children of Israel, (with this message): I have come to you with a sign from your Lord, in that I make for you out of clay as it were the figure of a bird, and breathe into it, and it becomes a bird by Allah's leave; and I heal those born blind, and the lepers and I quicken the dead by Allah's leave; and I declare to you what ye eat, and what ye store in your houses. Surely therein is a Sign for you if ye did believe. (49) (I have come to you), to attest the Law which was before me, and to make lawful to you part of what was (before) forbidden to you; I have come to you with a Sign from your Lord. So fear Allah and obey me. (50) It is Allah who is my Lord and your Lord; then worship Him. This is a way that is straight." (51)¹⁴

In the context of miracle, it is interesting to note that al-Qur'an told us the story of Jesus when He talks to the people a moment after His birth, while the Bible did not mention this miracle. Al-Qur'an said:

But she pointed to the babe. They said: "How can we talk to one who is a child in the cradle?" (29) He said: "I am indeed a servant of Allah: He hath given me revelation and made me a prophet; (30) "And He hath made me Blessed wheresoever I be, and hath enjoined on me Prayer and Charity as long as I live; (31) "(He) hath made me kind to my mother, and not overbearing or miserable; (32) "So Peace is on me the day I was born, the day that I die and the day that I shall be raised up to life (again)"! (33) Such (was) Jesus the son of Mary: (it is) a statement of truth, about which they (vainly) dispute. (34)¹⁵

¹³ QS. Maryam [19]:19-25.

¹⁴ QS. 'Alî 'Imrân [3]:48-51.

¹⁵ QS. Maryam [19]:29-34.

Continuing the miracle of Jesus Christ, al-Qur'an persisted that God sent Him the Holy Book (*al-Injil*).

We sent him the Gospel: therein was guidance and light, and confirmation of the law that had come before him: a guidance and an admonition to those who fear Allah.¹⁶ In another verse al-Qur'an said: We sent after them Jesus the son of Mary, and bestowed on him the Gospel; and We ordained in the hearts of those who followed him Compassion and Mercy. But the Monasticism which they invented for themselves, We did not prescribe for them: (We commanded) only the seeking for the Good pleasure of Allah; but that they did not foster as they should have done. Yet We bestowed, on those among them who believed, their (due) reward, but many of them are rebellious transgressors.¹⁷

Another distinctive point of Jesus Christ between al-Qur'an and the Bible is about crucifixion. When Christians believe that Jesus Christ was crucified, Muslims believe that the person crucified at the moment was not Jesus. Al-Qur'an said:

That they said (in boast), "We killed Christ Jesus the son of Mary, the Messenger of Allah"; but they killed him not, nor crucified him, but so it was made to appear to them and those who differ therein are full of doubts, with no (certain) knowledge, but only conjecture to follow, for of a surety they killed him not. Nay, Allah raised him up unto Himself; and Allah is Exalted in Power, Wise.¹⁸

Just to give comparative illustration between al-Qur'an and the Bible. Here are some verses of the Bible relating to crucifixion of Jesus.

31: And after that they had mocked him, they took the robe off from him, and put his own raiment on him, and led him away to crucify him. 32: And as they came out, they found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name: him they compelled to bear his cross. 33: And when they were come unto a place called Golgotha, that

¹⁶ QS. Al-Mâ'idah [5]:46.

¹⁷ QS. Al-Ĥadîd [57]:27.

¹⁸ QS. Al-Nisâ' [4]:157-158.

is to say, a place of a skull, 34: They gave him vinegar to drink mingled with gall: and when he had tasted thereof, he would not drink. 35: And they crucified him, and parted his garments, casting lots: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, They parted my garments among them, and upon my vesture did they cast lots. 36: And sitting down they watched him there; 37: And set up over his head his accusation written, this is Jesus the King of the Jews. THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS.¹⁹

19: And they smote him on the head with a reed, and did spit upon him, and bowing their knees worshipped him. 20: And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple from him, and put his own clothes on him, and led him out to crucify him.

21: And they compel one Simon a Cyrenian, who passed by, coming out of the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to bear his cross. 22: And they bring him unto the place Golgotha, which is, being interpreted, The place of a skull. 23: And they gave him to drink wine mingled with myrrh: but he received it not.

24: And when they had crucified him, they parted his garments, casting lots upon them, what every man should take. 25: And it was the third hour, and they crucified him. 26: And the superscription of his accusation was written over, THE KING OF THE JEWS.²⁰

Conclusion

In the QS. aṣ-Ṣaf [61]:6, al-Qur'an has obviously maintained that Jesus declared Himself as a prophet, messenger of God, who believe in the Holy Book before and after Him. *And remember Jesus, the son of Mary, said: "O Children of Israel! I am the Messenger of Allah (sent) to you confirming the Law (which came) before me, and giving glad Tidings of a Messenger to come after me, whose name shall be Ahmad."* But when he came to them with Clear Signs they said "This is evident sorcery!"²¹ This point reminds us to place Jesus as a "brother" of the Prophet Mohammad and the Prophet Moses. Al-

¹⁹ Mat 27:31-33.

²⁰ Mark 15:19-26.

²¹ QS. Aṣ-Ṣaf [61]:6.

Qur'an has also described Jesus Christ as a very important slice of prophetic orbit within Abrahamic religions. In addition, Islam has also presented its own interpretations of Jesus' life which is called as *Islamic Christology*.

Knowing and understanding Islamic Christology will enrich our perspective of Jesus' life and, that is, narrow theological disparities between Muslim and Christian perception of Jesus Christ. In the context of interfaith dialogue, it is very important for us to convene *kalimah sawâ'* (a common word) between Islam and Christianity. It does not mean to look for differentiation but to assemble the common ideas of Jesus in both Islam and Christianity.

Scheme:
Connected Points on Jesus Christ
between Moslem and Christian Perspective

Moslem Perspective	Christian Perspective
Jesus was born by no-father. It was a creation of Allah (QS. Maryam [19]:19-20 and QS. 'Alî 'Imrân [3]:42-48)	Jesus was born by no-father. It was a creation of Allah (Luke 1:26-35)
<i>Hawârîyyûn</i> , the great followers (QS. 'Alî 'Imrân [3]:52-53 and QS. Aş-Şaf [61]:14)	The twelve disciples (Mat 10:1-9)
The miracles of Jesus, such as healing those born blind and the lepers, and quickening the dead (QS. 'Alî 'Imrân [3]:48-51)	The miracles of Jesus, such as healing those born blind and the lepers, and quickening the dead (Read John 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6; Luke, Mark, and Mat)
Allah sent a Holy Book (<i>al-Înjîl</i>) to Jesus (QS. Al-Ma'idah: [5]:46 and QS. Al-Hâdîd [57]:27)	The Bible (Holy Book) is the teachings of Jesus
<i>Rûh al-Qudus</i> (QS. Al-Baqarah [2]:87 and 136)	Holy spirit (John 14:26, Luke 11:13, Act 2:38)
Allah raised him up unto Himself (QS. An-Nisâ' [4]:158)	carried up into heaven (Luke 24:51)

This scheme probably can clarify that, besides several theological distinctions, there are also similarities between Muslim and Christian perspective of Jesus Christ. This point should be a modal to formulate "melting pot" where Muslims and Christians can sit, discuss and work together. Humanity of Jesus is supposed to enlarge humanity of us, humanity of religious believers.

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