

A Common Word (Surah 3:64) between Muslims and Christians?

Reflections on Interreligious Misunderstandings and Polyphonic Understanding

Henning Wrogemann

Dr Henning Wrogemann holds the chair for Science of Religion and Intercultural Theology at the Protestant University Wuppertal, Germany, and is head of the Institute for Intercultural Theology and Interreligious Studies (IITIS) at the Protestant University Wuppertal/Bethel.

Abstract

The article inquires critically into the operative understanding of “unity” when the motto of the WCC assembly speaks of the love of Christ uniting the world. What does this mean for the relationship between Christians and other religions, especially Islam? Muslims repeatedly refer to the “Common Word” mentioned in Surah 3:64 as the basis of Muslim–Christian interactions. The author shows that Muslims and Christians dispute over what “to be lord” means precisely, since Christians recognize and testify to God’s presence in Jesus Christ, their Lord. The Islamic doctrine of the uniqueness of God (tawhīd in Arabic) fundamentally contradicts this conviction. The author shows that in Muslim practice, very different consequences may derive from tawhīd, ranging from cooperation to conflict. Along the lines of a polyphonic understanding, the author seeks ways for a peaceful coexistence that does not comprise the Christian faith witness.

Keywords

interreligious dialogue, Christianity and Islam, Qur’ān, Christian witness, unity, hermeneutics

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Which Unity Are We Talking About?

The theme of the next assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) is “Christ’s love moves the world to reconciliation and unity.” This motto raises the topics of, first, Christ’s moving love; second, the world; third, reconciliation; and, fourth, unity. This constellation already poses a challenge for intra-Christian relations, and even more so for the field of interreligious relations. A plethora of questions arise: What is meant by “world,” what is understood by “reconciliation,” and what does the talk about “unity” mean in view of the many religions? Which unity are we talking about here?

Since the WCC was founded, Christians have passionately debated each other about the concept of unity. Some prefer to speak of the unity of the church, others of the fellowship between churches; some seek an organic union, others look for common ground on doctrinal issues, while still others aim at practical cooperation. Which of these may be applied to the interreligious sphere? This article will examine the question of unity or commonality on the basis of Christian–Muslim relations. Muslims often refer to a famous verse from the Qur’an which seems to offer a common basis. From a Christian point of view, however, it is necessary to inquire critically into whether this basis postulated by Muslims is actually acceptable to Christians if they want to remain faithful to their confession of Jesus Christ as the Son of God, as their Lord, and as the Redeemer of humankind and the cosmos.

Those pursuing interreligious discussions frequently refer to a particular verse in the Qur’an that seems to offer a veritably paradigmatic basis for dialogical coexistence. Surah 3:64 reads: “Say: O People of the Scripture! Come to a common word between us and you: that we shall worship none but God, and that we shall ascribe no partner unto Him, and that none of us shall take others for lords beside God.”¹ Several actors believe that this passage pre-eminently refers to the one God and an ethically responsible way of life. The good feeling arising from a sense of agreeing at least on this point makes it tempting not to inquire too closely into how this text may be understood within the context of the Qur’anic message and in Islamic discourses.

¹ The Qur’an, Surah 3:64, quoted in A Common Word, “A Common Word between Us and You,” Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, Amman, Jordan, <https://www.acommonword.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/ACW-English-Translation.pdf>. Although no bibliographic information is provided regarding the source of the English translation of Surah 3:64 cited here, this wording is cited throughout this paper in reference to Surah 3:64, since it has in recent years come to serve in English-speaking circles as a kind of standard diction for Muslim efforts toward dialogue with Christians. The wording is cited in this paper as “Surah 3:64, *A Common Word*.” All other quotations from the Qur’an in this paper are drawn from M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur’an*, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) and are simply cited according to Surah and verse. Texts rendered in italics and in bold for emphasis are my own work.

From a Christian perspective, Surah 3:64 is certainly not as unproblematic as it may seem at first glance.² The misunderstanding stems from underestimating the wide-reaching doctrinal, social, and political consequences flowing from the Islamic doctrine of the oneness of God (*tawhīd* in Arabic) in the view of many Muslims. For this reason, this paper will proceed by addressing the understanding of Surah 3:64 in comparison to the Christian confession of Jesus Christ as Lord, as Kyrios.

The Question of "Taking Others for Lords" *besides* God and Jesus Christ as *Kyrios*

According to the testimony of the New Testament, God is described in the event transpiring between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as a God who loves with complete devotion. Since God himself is present in Jesus, it is immediately obvious that Jesus can only be understood as Lord, as attested in the Apostles' Creed every Sunday.³ The New Testament takes the divine attribute Kyrios ("Lord") attested in the Old Testament and assigns it to Jesus Christ – for the very reason that it sees God at work in Jesus, thereby revealing his innermost being.⁴ Reinhard Feldmeier and Hermann Spieckermann point out that

the God of the Old Testament changed names in the New Testament, as it were. In the first instance, κύριος "Lord" no longer reflects his nature, but πατήρ "Father," which came increasingly to be employed in an absolute sense. This name change did not fail to have repercussions for our understanding of God. While the concept of Lord implies the servant as a counterpart, Father implies child. Thus . . . the scope of divine name shifted from power to attention and community. . . . In this regard, two things merit notice: First, in the understanding of the early Christians, the Father God of the New Testament is the God of the Old Testament who revealed himself definitely in Jesus Christ. . . . Second, by no means does the name Father suppress the idea of divine power or dominion, and it certainly does not replace it with the idea of limits of God's power. Christianity retained the Kyrios title but transferred it to Christ. At the same time, the God addressed as Father also remains the "Lord of heaven and earth" (Matt 11:25 par. Luke 10:21), "for whom anything is possible" (Mark 14:36). Only the (All-)Powerful One can raise the Crucified One and exalted him as Lord over all creation. . . . To this extent, the "new" name of God makes it clear that the New Testament can no longer speak of God's being as God without reference to the Son. Rather, God is God only as the Father of his Son and of the children adopted through the "Spirit of the Son" (Gal 4:5-6).⁵

² Hanna Josua, *Ibrahim, der Gottesfreund: Idee und Problem einer Abrahamischen Ökumene* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016).

³ As is well known, the Apostles' Creed asserts, "I believe in God, the Father . . . And in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit."

⁴ See, for instance, Romans 10:9; 1 Corinthians 8:6; Philemon 2:11. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, eds, *Exegetisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, vol. 2, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1992), s.v. "Κύριος / κυριακός."

⁵ R. Feldmeier and H. Spieckermann, *God of the Living: A Biblical Theology* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2011), 49–50.

Now what about the statement in Surah 3:64 that the “common word” consists in the fact *that we serve none but God alone and do not associate others with him, and that we do not take others for lords beside God?*⁶ Here an implied reproach is being addressed to the *people of the book*, among whom the Qur’an pre-eminently includes all Jews and Christians. Elsewhere, the Qur’anic critique becomes even clearer when it accuses Christians of taking Jesus and Mary *as gods beside God*. For instance, in Surah 5:116, a question is posed to the prophet *‘Isā* against a backdrop of transcendental scenery: “When God says, ‘Jesus, son of Mary, did you say to people: “Take me and my mother as two gods alongside God”?’,” the Qur’anic *‘Isā* answers:

May You be exalted! I would never say what I had no right to say – if I had said such a thing, You would have known it: You know all that is within me, though I do not know what is within You, You alone have full knowledge of things unseen – (117) I told them only what You commanded me to: “Worship God, my Lord and your Lord.”

At this point, then, God and *‘Isā* are clearly separated from each other, although it is not clear from the text which specific group of people the Qur’an accuses of “taking others as gods”: It does not specify anywhere who exactly the Qur’anic Christians (*naṣārā* in Arabic) are supposed to be.⁷ According to the Christian understanding, however, the accusation levelled here in this form does not pertain to the doctrinal tradition of the Christian church. More on this later.

In any case, the Qur’an here quotes *‘Isā* as speaking in the first person, and thus expressly appeals to him in opposition to the invocation of Jesus as “Lord.” The difference between the prophet *‘Isā* and God is again emphasized when the Qur’an highlights the assertion that while God knows the inner life of *‘Isā*, *‘Isā* does not know the inner life of God.

In the Qur’anic call of Surah 3:64, a commission is given to the herald:

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

According to the view of the New Testament, to serve only God means to believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Saviour of the world, and to follow him as Lord and Saviour. What is at issue here is whether this Christian faith necessarily falls *eo ipso* under

⁶ For more on translating the Arabic phrase “min dūni ‘llāhi” as “besides God,” see Gerald R. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 50–51.

⁷ Sidney Griffith, “Al-Naṣārā in the Qur’ān: A Hermeneutical Reflection,” in *New Perspectives on the Qur’ān*, ed. Gabriel Said Reynolds (London: Routledge, 2011), 301–22.

the Quranic verdict of ascribing partners (*shirk* in Arabic) in the sense of denying the oneness of God (*tawhīd* in Arabic).

Some passages suggest that this may well be the case, such as Surah 3:79–80, which can be read as a rejection of any kind of proximity between prophets and God:

No person to whom God has given the Scripture, wisdom, and prophethood would ever say to people, 'Be my servants, not God's.' [He would say], 'You should be devoted to God because you have taught the Scripture and studied it closely.' He would never command you to take angels and prophets as lords. How could he command you to be disbelievers after you had devoted yourselves to God?

From a Christian perspective, the criticism levelled at the demand “be my servants, not God’s” does not pertain to Christian Christology, since faith in Jesus Christ is not about confessing him as Lord and Saviour in place of God, but about recognizing in him God’s action for the benefit of people and the world. From a medial point of view, this is not about the topic of *Scripture/Book* (as the Qur’anic statements claim in Surah 3:79), but about the topic of the incarnation of the divine Word in Jesus Christ. It is about the fact that God is *in* Jesus Christ as the crucified and risen Lord, as it says in 2 Corinthians: “God was in Christ (θεὸς ἦν ἐν χριστῷ in Greek) reconciling the world to Himself” (2 Cor. 5:19 NKJV).

There are a number of other Qur’anic references to the accusation of taking others for lords *besides* God. Our framework will allow us to consider only one additional reference. Surah 9:30–31 frames the accusation in stronger, more polemical language:

*The Jews said, 'Ezra is the son of God,' and the Christians said, 'The Messiah is the son of God': they said this with their own mouths, repeating what earlier disbelievers had said. May God confound them! . . . They take their rabbis and their monks as lords [**besides God** (the original Arabic reads: min dūni 'llāhi)], **as well as Christ**, the son of Mary. But they were commanded to serve only one God: there is no god but Him; He is far above whatever they set up as His partners!*

This passage clearly enunciates the accusation of ascribing partners, defining the “taking as lords” as “taking something *besides God* as lord.” Yet precisely this set of alternatives, which arises from the Qur’anic understanding of the oneness and uniqueness of God (*tawhīd* in Arabic), is incompatible with the New Testament conception of God. For the New Testament is all about God revealing himself in the life, in the death, and in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, in his incarnation.⁸

For this reason, there is no “common word” between Muslims and Christians, as Surah 3:64 suggests, since the respective conception of God – irrespective of the singular – is

⁸ Reinhard Feldmeier and Hermann Spieckermann, *Menschwerdung* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018).

fundamentally different. The profound difference, however, is not apparent at first sight, and this explains the popularity of Surah 3:64 in the context of interreligious communication. The rather vague and yet comforting feeling of (ostensible) unity comes at the expense of theological ambiguity. This becomes clear when Surah 3:64 is understood against the backdrop of texts like Surahs 3:80 and 9:31, since they demonstrate that the accusation of ascribing partners is described in the Qur'an in many ways.

When engaging in interreligious dialogue, one would therefore have to clarify in more precise terms how the above-mentioned accusations are to be understood. From a Christian point of view, God *himself* reveals himself *in* the Christ event in an ultimately definitive manner. It is illegitimate to invoke the New Testament as a mere model of Christology, which is the main objective of many models of religious pluralism. On the contrary, the Christ event is all about an event of vicarious substitution taking place in the life, death, and resurrection of the crucified one. Therefore, those who believe that a Christian Christology can be assimilated into an Islamic prophetology must ask themselves whether they are not perhaps missing the point of the New Testament witness.

Vicarious Substitution as a Sacrificial Life: The Love of the Son of God

In his book *Ecce homo*, Bernd Janowski points out that the vicarious substitution of Jesus Christ can be particularly well described by the concept of a sacrificial life (*Lebenshingabe* in the German original). As Janowski puts it,

The concept of a “sacrificial life” has the advantage of being defined as broadly as possible, since it encompasses not only aspects of “sacrifice,” “expiation,” and “death,” but also, depending on the context, aspects of “love,” “friendship,” and “devotion.” It thus has an *active* (“sacrificing oneself”) and a *passive* dimension (“being sacrificed”). Accordingly, the phrase “sacrificing one’s life for others” does not refer a priori and exclusively to the *substitutionary death of Jesus* but can also mean *unconditional solidarity with people*. The term “sacrificial life” signifies the total existence of Jesus, i.e. the *life* that Jesus lived in loving devotion to others, *and* the *death* that was the consequence and not the ultimate purpose of this life.⁹

According to Janowski, this important correlation can be illustrated, for example, in the case of the Good Shepherd discourse of Jesus in John 10:11-18, since what Jesus does *for* the people takes centre stage. Janowski argues that the Good Shepherd gives his life *for* (ὐπὲρ) the sheep (verse 11) and lays down his life for his sheep (verse 15). Jesus emerges as “the only true shepherd” and his flock as “a community patiently waiting for

⁹ Bernd Janowski, *Ecce homo: Stellvertretung und Lebenshingabe als Themen Biblischer Theologie*, 2nd ed. (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2009), 68.

their rightful Shepherd.”¹⁰ “Since in the entire tradition of the visual frame, the owner of the flock has always been God, the hearers have no choice but to understand the discourse of Jesus as the Shepherd as the transfer of a divine attribute from the OT to his own person.”¹¹

The sacrificial life of the Good Shepherd Jesus can now be understood as the pro-existence of the shepherd who risks his life for the sake of the flock. God *himself* is seen as being at work in him (Jesus). The vicarious sacrificial life of Jesus Christ as that of the Lord, his devoted love, is answered by the love of the Father. Thus, the motifs of a sacrificial life of loving devotion, vicarious substitution, and the Son of God as Lord form a unified whole in which the motif of the love of the Father for the Son and of the Son for the Father finds expression.¹²

Believers discern God’s presence in Jesus Christ as the Good Shepherd who acts for them. Jesus Christ is the Lord, the Kyrios, as Thomas vocalizes before the risen crucified One: ὁ κύριός μου και θεός μου – *My Lord and my God!* (John 20:28). In other writings of the New Testament, too, the motif of the sacrificial life of Jesus Christ is of central importance. Examples include Romans 8:32, Galatians 1:3-4, Titus 2:13-14, and Mark 10:45.¹³ In the Christ event, God’s very essence can be discerned, but at the same time, the sinful world can be seen for what it is, namely a world in need of salvation; and in this event, the triune God renders salvation accessible to human beings, if they acknowledge it in faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.

Different Conceptions of God: Dialogical Concessions?

Given the differences between the conceptions of God in the Qur’an and the biblical–New Testament witness, is it necessary to make certain concessions in order to draw “closer” to each other in interreligious dialogue – or not?¹⁴ Would it not be better simply to agree that both sides should *avoid* talking about this question in order to avoid unnecessary friction? Should references to Surah 3:64 be abandoned? How should this verse be understood?

¹⁰ Ibid., 72–73. See also Ezekiel 34:11-16 in particular.

¹¹ Zimmermann, *Jesus*, 22, quoted in Janowski, *Ecce homo*, 73–74.

¹² Christof Gestrinch, *Die Wiederkehr des Glanzes in der Welt: Die christliche Lehre von der Sünde und ihrer Vergebung in gegenwärtiger Verantwortung*, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1996).

¹³ See also Ephesians 5:2, 25; 1 Timothy 2:6; Galatians 2:20. Janowski, *Ecce Homo*, 71.

¹⁴ Henning Wrogemann, *Religionswissenschaft und Interkulturelle Theologie* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2020), 545–610.

Possibilities for discussion arise, for example, when Muslim authors apply the verse to socio-political contexts. The accusation of ascribing partners (*shirk* in Arabic) is thus gradually understood less in terms of doctrine (which, however, remains unalterable). For example, the South African Sunni scholar Farid Esack (b. 1957) interprets the oneness of God (*tawhīd* in Arabic) as the basis for oneness between human beings in the sense of an Islamic liberation theology. The oneness of God prohibits some from becoming masters at the expense of others. Those who submit as followers and henchmen to these oppressive “lords” therefore engage in the unjust ascribing of partners (*shirk* in Arabic).¹⁵ The ascribing of partners is understood here in a political sense by way of theological inference, namely as “not orienting oneself toward the oneness of God” at the expense of others. Esack, the South African, criticized the apartheid system first and foremost as ascribing partners. His criticism is, however, also directed in a more general sense toward any form of oppression of people by people in the name of a higher idea such as a political, religious, sexist, or racist ideology.

A Polyphonic Understanding: The Levels of Doctrine, Praxis, Symbolism, and Apologetics

The example above has shown that when people want to appeal to Surah 3:64 as the basis for interreligious communication, a polyphonic understanding may be helpful.¹⁶ In other words, a text like this verse may be understood on different levels.

On the theological level, it would be imperative to precisely define the concept of *taking others for lords besides God*. Muslims understand the ascribing of partners (*shirk* in Arabic) as an action that contradicts the uniqueness of God (*tawhīd* in Arabic) and is therefore to be rejected and, if necessary, actively opposed. The topic of “the *only* God” thus has manifold and far-reaching consequences.

On the political level, we need to inquire into the operative interpretation of politics. While actors such as Esack believe that ideologies like apartheid violate the principle of *tawhīd*, many Salafist actors associate the *tawhīd* doctrine with the democratic system because they see Islam and democracy as incompatible. For this reason, they accuse democratically minded Muslims of ascribing partners and declare them to be infidels (*takefīr* in Arabic).¹⁷ The violent outbursts accompanying militant Salafism may be observed in many countries.

¹⁵ Farid Esack, *Qur’ān, Liberation & Pluralism* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2002).

¹⁶ Gerd Theissen, *Polyphones Verstehen*, 2nd ed. (Berlin: LIT-Verlag, 2015).

¹⁷ See Joas Wagemakers, “The *Kāfir* Religion of the West: *Takefīr* of Democracy and Democrats by Radical Islamists,” in *Accusations of Unbelief in Islam: A Diachronic Perspective on Takefīr*, ed. C. Adang et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 327–53. Islamists frequently refer to verses like Surah 18:26, Surah 12:40, and Surah 9:31.

With regard to the symbolic level, we ought to ask how the medial implementation of the veneration of God / the divine is understood. This issue, too, is strongly contested among Muslims. For example, in 2012, Salafists took stringent and indeed violent action against local popular Islam in Timbuktu, and they destroyed the world-famous Sufi shrines found there. The Salafist Jihādists pointedly accused the local Muslim population of disregarding the uniqueness of God (*tawhīd*) by ascribing partners to him (*shirk*) in *taking others for lords besides God* (in this case, Sufi saints). This example (to which several more might be added) shows that theologoumena such as a certain interpretation of the *tawhīd* doctrine offer considerable potential for conflict.

On the level of religious apologetics, too, we need to consider the significance of Surah 3:64 when, for example, media preachers known worldwide, such as the Indian Muslim Zakir Naik, understand this verse as the central basis of their call to Islam (*da'wab* in Arabic) in their quest to convert people of other religions (such as Hindus and Christians) to Islam.¹⁸ In *da'wab* discourses around the world, the following themes play out many times a day: (1) All religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, etc.) actually teach (or taught) *tawhīd*, (2) but they have deviated from the truth, and their scriptures have become corrupted (*tahrīf* in Arabic). (3) Therefore, they need to be called back to the only true religion, Islam, which requires (4) that they recognize their errors and renounce their false doctrines and practices. Key throughout is the accusation of taking others for lords *besides God*, as well as regular appeals to Surah 3:64 as a central Qur'anic proof-text.

The reference to Surah 3:64 thus evokes a variety of responses among Muslims, depending on their orientation. So how should we approach a text like this? Might a polyphonic understanding be helpful?

A Polyphonic Understanding Using the Example of Surah 3:64

Attaining a polyphonic understanding does not mean to achieve harmony by allowing everyone to interpret a text as they please. This is not about truth in the plural sense, but rather about commitment (on both sides) to the ultimate validity claim arising from what people perceive as the revelation of God's actions. Hence, polyphonic understanding means that, with regard to a text or a theological motif, Christians and Muslims disagree about faith and doctrine on an ongoing basis, and, as a result, they also reject the opposing position on an ongoing basis. This is not a matter of compromise.

It is impossible to simultaneously confess God's relational essence as that of the triune God and deny it by affirming God's uniqueness in the sense of the Qur'anic *tawhīd*. In

¹⁸ Matthew J. Kuiper, *Da'wa and Other Religions* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 221.

terms of dialogue theory, this calls for dealing with differences honestly, instead of sidestepping points of dissent. It also calls for an intellectual probing into the magnitude of the differences, and it means discerning the mainstream religious view of the other side (in this instance, that of the Qur'an and the Muslims who invoke it).¹⁹ The aim is to formulate a realistic assessment of interreligious relations.

Polyphonic understanding means locating a text (such as Surah 3:64, in this case) on several levels, since relationships between people always “take place” on several levels at the same time.²⁰ If Christians cannot accept the text of Surah 3:64 in the horizon of its Qur'anic reference texts as a basis on the doctrinal level, they may well accept it on the level of its ethical implications, at least to the extent that Christians also denounce the act of taking human beings for lords at the expense of other human beings. The consensus would consist in the principle of not taking any people for lords in an ethical-political sense. At the same time, one would need to bear in mind that from a Christian point of view, this verse may not be leveraged against the Christian faith and the New Testament witness, while Muslims may well believe this to be its intended sense and, presumably, many Muslims will continue to believe this to be true.

Now if this is so, then the issue is not only the disagreement as such, but also the way in which people (in this instance, Muslim actors especially) articulate this disagreement, as well as the consequences they draw from it. Radical Salafists (both militant and non-militant), for example, interpret this verse and other Qur'anic verses as an instruction to distance themselves from Christians as infidels (*kaḥfīrīn* in Arabic) and polytheists (*mushrikīn* in Arabic) and not to “take them as friends.”²¹ In extreme cases, they may demand that Muslims demonstrate their displeasure and disapproval of religious “others” by way of gestures – for example, by insisting that Christians greet Muslims first (never the other way round) in order to express the inferior status of Christians.²²

Esack's example shows that Surah 3:64 may constitute an ongoing point of dissent with regard to doctrine, while with regard to ethical implications it may certainly represent an important basis for joint action against discrimination and violence, bearing in mind, of course, that the Christian motivation behind such action arises for the most part from other theological motifs.

¹⁹ Francis Abdelmassieh, *Egyptian-Islamic Views on the Comparison of Religions* (Münster: LIT-Verlag, 2020).

²⁰ Henning Wrogemann, *A Theology of Interreligious Relations* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2019), 211–302.

²¹ Joas Wagemakers, “Framing the ‘threat to Islam’: al-wala’ wa al-bara’ in Salafi discourse,” in *Arab Studies Quarterly* 30 (2008): 1–21.

²² Joas Wagemakers, “Salafistische Strömungen und ihre Sicht auf al-wala’ wa al-bara’ (Loyalität und Lossagung),” in *Salafismus*, ed. Behnam T. Said and Hazim Fouad (Freiburg: Herder, 2014), 70–72.

One such motif is the Christian doctrine of the justification of the sinner by faith alone. Gerd Theissen aptly formulates:

The message of justification aims at the unity of humankind. As it is, there is no distinction between people, for as sinners they are all equal before God. And there will be no distinction in future either, because God wants to save by faith [in Jesus Christ, HW] alone. This social function of the doctrine of justification is most clearly seen in the epistle to the Ephesians. The justification of human beings tears down the dividing wall that created hostility between Jew and Gentile.²³

Interpreting texts by way of an approach of polyphonic understanding can help us to read them in consideration of different levels, thereby expressing, in view of interreligious relations, the simultaneity of aspects first of rejection, second of tolerance, third of appreciation, and fourth of mutual witness. What could this mean in the case of the text at issue here?

Rejection. With regard to Surah 3:64, as shown above, this means that Christians reject the claim Muslims read out of this text: that by believing in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, Christians take something besides God as their Lord. Christians reject this claim because according to the testimony of the New Testament, God reveals himself in the Christ event by virtue of it being the incarnation of God. In accordance with their Christological–trinitarian conception of God, Christians may of course agree with the abstract statement that one should not take anything besides God as Lord. However, in point of fact, such an abstract statement is *not* found in the Qur’anic message and its manifold polemics against what it considers to be “Christians.” Therefore, Christians cannot agree with this text or with any of the other polemical statements.

Tolerance. Christians might tolerate a Muslim invocation of Surah 3:64 to the extent that Muslims do not derive from it any conduct that is disparaging of Christians. However, when Muslims who consider Christians and other non-Muslims to be unbelievers appeal to Qur’anic texts in order to justify their maltreatment of them, as compared to their fellow Muslims, then that is where tolerance ends. When Christians treat adherents of other faiths disrespectfully, then the same would need, of course, to apply also to them.

Appreciation. At the same time, Christians can acknowledge the ideological-critical interpretation of Surah 3:64 by Muslims (such as Farid Esack) and appreciate it as an

²³ Theissen, *Polyphones Verstehen*, 75.

Islamic basis for the common commitment against racism, sexism, ethnocentrism, etc. Here Christians would be acknowledging not the text as such, but rather a particular Islamic interpretation of it.

Testimony. At the same time, however, Christians are called to testify to Muslims about their own theological basis for such a commitment: in this case, the justification of sinners by faith in Jesus Christ alone (*sola gratia* in Latin) as the Lord and Saviour of humankind.

Tolerance. This Christian testimony in turn demands of Muslims the willingness to tolerate the Christian testimony in its otherness (and for Muslims certainly also in its offensiveness) and to show respect to Christians in the process. Tolerance here means that Muslims accept the other even though they cannot agree with the Christian theological view, since according to the Qur'an, no being can obtain something for another being before God. This means that Muslims reject justification by grace on the basis of the vicarious substitution of Christ and insist on adherence to right guidance (*hudā* in Arabic) instead.²⁴

A Theology of Interreligious Relations and a Polyphonic Understanding

As the example of Surah 3:64 shows, a polyphonic understanding means that Christians may (1) theologically reject this text, but at the same time (2) appreciate it for its ethical implications and, in view of points of ethical overlap, use it as a basis for cooperation, while (3) viewing it as an opportunity for a Christian testimony of faith. In interreligious relations, this facilitates a simultaneous consideration of the aspects of rejection, tolerance, recognition, and mutual witness. For the approach of a theology of interreligious relations in the sense of a polyphonic understanding, it is fundamental that one's own faith witness is neither suppressed nor distorted beyond recognition by the obscuration of theological-doctrinal points of difference.²⁵ There needs to be room for theological differences and thus also for the possibility of rejection if participants in the relations are to take seriously their own fundamentals of faith. Christian church bodies, congregations, and employees are therefore called upon at all levels to reflect anew on the New

²⁴ F. M. Denny, "The Problem of Salvation in the Qur'an: Key Terms and Concepts", in *In Quest of an Islamic Humanism: Arabic and Islamic Studies in Memory of Mohamed al-Nowaihi*, ed. A. H. Green (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1984), 196–210.

²⁵ Wrogemann, *A Theology of Interreligious Relations*.

Testament testimony of the God whom Christians have confessed as their Lord and Saviour since the beginnings of the church, as Saviour and Redeemer of all people, the world, and the cosmos. This testimony does not retard but rather opens up a dialogical approach and constructive relations with religious “others.” This needs to be rediscovered time and time again.