On several occasions the Qurʾān makes mention of Christian priests or monks, sometimes praising them, at other times criticizing them severely. Muslims derive most of their knowledge about priestly and religious life among Christians from these texts and tend to base their judgments of Christianity in part on them. Since the passages are often quoted when Christians and Muslims meet in dialogue, it is worthwhile knowing something about their historical background and about the situations in which they came to be used in the Qurʾān.

In order to understand how the Qurʾānic terms for Jewish and Christian functionaries were used, it will help to see what Muhammad had in mind at the beginning of his preaching career in 612 A.D. and how his initial conception developed over the next two decades. When he began to announce at Mecca the messages he believed he was receiving from God, he probably regarded them only as religious admonitions and himself as a warner: “Arise and warn” (74. 2); “They turn away from the admonition” (74. 49/50); and “Indeed, it (the Qurʾān) is an admonition” (80. 11). Later, in his stay at Medina, circumstances obliged him to add to his religious role the functions of military and civil leader. The content of his preaching too he understood in the beginning as God’s word of warning addressed to the Arabs (20. 113/112). At a certain stage early in his mission he came to believe that the essential teachings of the Jewish and Christian scriptures were identical with his own and that all three scriptures had their origin in a heavenly archetype. Towards the close of his career, however, he had concluded that what he was proclaiming was the only true religion destined for all mankind (9. 33/32).
After Muhammad’s death, when the Qur’ān came to be used as a legal source, Muslim jurists ruled that the latest verse on any subject abrogated any earlier verses that contradicted it. This required Muslims to classify the 114 suras (or chapters) of the Qur’ān as “Meccan” or “Medinan,” that is, announced before or after Muhammad’s hijra (emigration) from Mecca to Medina accomplished in September 622. This traditional dating later provided a basis for attempts by European scholars to work out what they considered a more exact sequence. But efforts to order the Qur’ān chronologically have resulted for the most part only in approximations. Blachère’s is one of the modern chronologies of the text that has gained fairly widespread acceptance among Islamists.¹ Richard Bell’s investigations led him to the conviction that dating the Qur’ān must proceed by individual pericopes rather than by whole suras.² Blachère has accepted many of Bell’s conclusions.

The Qur’ān uses four terms to designate Jewish or Christian religious functionaries: (1) ḥabr (pl. aḥbār), a learned man of the Jews or Christians, a non-Muslim religious authority; (2) rabbānī (pl. rabbānīyūn), one who devotes himself to religious services or to acts of devotion, a learned man; (3) rāhib (pl. ruḥbān), fearing a fearer (of God), a Christian devotee or monk; (4) qass and qissīs (pl. quissīsūn), head of the Christians in religion; an elder, presbyter or priest.

Only one of these four terms, rāhib, monk, seems to be a genuine Arabic word. Of the other three, ḥabr is borrowed from the Hebrew³ where it means conjurer or sorcerer or, with some modification of the radicals, an associate or friend. A cognate term with related meanings is found in Syriac. Rabbānī, a Syriac word, was commonly used in Muhammad’s time as a diminutive form of

1. Régis Blachère, Le Coran: traduction selon un essai de reclessement des sourates (2 vols.; Paris: Maisonneuve, 1947-51). In references to the Qur’ān, verse numbers preceding the diagonal are those of the standard Egyptian edition, those following are the numbers of Filūgel’s edition.


reverential address for priests and monks. Blachère regards this term as a borrowing from the dialect of the Medinan Jews and refers it to the Aramaic rabbānā of John 20: 16. Qass or qīssīs is a Syriac word both of whose forms were used by the Arab tribes in contact with Christian groups living north and east of Arabia. The importance of Syriac as the main source for Qurʾānic borrowings seems due in part to the fact that it was the liturgical language of the Arabic-speaking Christians in seventh century Arabia.

All these terms for Jewish and Christian functionaries occur in suras which Blachère dates from the Medinan Period (622-632). Some were used in verses first proclaimed in Mecca but later taken from their original setting and inserted, often in revised form, into their present Qurʾānic context. Bell dates the earliest Medinan reference to a non-Muslim religious functionary from around the time when Muhammad was ridding Islam of Jewish practices. He had changed the qibla or prayer direction from Jerusalem to the Meccan Kaʿba between December 623 and February 624 and around mid-March 624 had substituted the Fast of Ramaḍān for the Jewish Day of Atonement. The Qurʾān (2. 142f/136-138 and 183-185/179-181) makes mention of both events. It was at about this time too, May-June 624, that Muhammad began the

4. Arthur Jeffery, The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qurʾān (Lahore: Al-Biruni, 1967) 138. Although the title rabbānī is used for priests and monks, the two groups are distinct. Muhammad, in using the two terms conjointly in 5. 82/85, seems to have been aware of this difference. In the seventh century the monk of the desert was generally not a priest. He belonged to a group distinct from the ordained clergy who stayed in the world and assisted the bishops. Some monks were ordained priests in order to administer the sacraments to their fellows, but the usual monk was a layman.

5. Blachère, Le Coran, 877 n.
8. Blachère’s chronological classification is as follows: 1st-48th, First Meccan Period (612 and 615-616); 49th-70th, Second Meccan Period (616-19); 71st-92nd, Third Meccan Period (619-22); 93rd-116th, Medinan Period (622-32). The ordinal preceding the number of the sura refers to this sequence. The Qurʾān has 114 suras, but Blachère numbers 116. He comes to this figure by making Sura 74 and 96 into four suras, numbering Suras 73 and 76 as 34 and 34 bis, and omitting the 64th place in his ordering. See Blachère, Le Coran, 2: xv.
production of a Book intended as a revelation which would be independent of the Jewish and Christian Scriptures.  

In accord with this new trend the Syriac word *rabbānī*, in common use as a title for Christian priests and monks, appears for the first time in the Qur’ān on three occasions, two of them in Sura Five. Sura Five itself is a composite of material which Bell dates from three periods: (1) May-June 624; (2) around the time of the Treaty of Hudaybiya in April 628; and (3) after the conquest of Mecca in December 629. The three occurrences in Blachère’s approximate sequence and Bell’s supplementary dating are as follows:

(116th) 5. 44/48 We revealed the Torah. . . . By it the prophets, self-surrendering to God as they were, gave judgment for those who were Jewish. The Christian priests (*rabbāniyyūn*) and Jewish scholars (*aḥbār*) also dispensed judgment by that part of God’s Book (Gospel or Hebrew Bible) committed to their custody and for which they were witnesses.

The phrase *an-nabiyyūna lladhīna aslamū*, “the prophets who were self-surrendering (to God)” does not mean that some prophets were not self-surrendering (i.e., Muslims) but is merely inserted as a laudatory attribute of all prophets. Bella attributes 5. 44/48 to the earliest of the three components of Sura Five, that is, to the period from late December 623 to February 624 when the qibla was changed.

The second passage (3. 79/73) to use *rabbānī* rebukes under this title both Christian and Jewish doctors of learning, the Jews for trying to make their oral law appear to be supported by the Pentateuch and the Christians for worshipping Jesus:

12. Ibid. 92.
15. Blachère, *Le Coran*, 376 n., citing Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān* (Beirut: Dār al-Ma‘rifa, 1400/1980), *ad loc.*, who offers the comment that this verse was revealed to people who have a true Scripture, that is, Jews and Christians.
3. 79/73 It does not belong to any human being that God should give him the (revealed) Book and jurisdiction and the prophetic office and that he should then say to people: Be you worshippers of me apart from God. But (he ought to say): Be you revered masters (rabbanīyīn), in that you teach the Book and in that you study (it).

Here Muhammad no longer conceives Islam as appealing to Jews and Christians for confirmation as in previous suras. Rather he reminds the "revered masters" of both religions of their duties and rebukes them for their departures from the true teachings imparted through the Qur'ān.

The third occurrence of rabbanī uses the term in combination with aḥbār (Jewish scholars) as in 5. 44/48. The passage (5. 63/68) in which it occurs is an early Medinan text twice revised. These three pericopes show a definite progression in thought and content. The first (5. 44/48) merely relates how God gave Jews and Christians revealed writings. He then appointed prophets, Christian priests, and Jewish scholars to insure that the laws contained in these writings would be observed and that the writings themselves would be preserved without alteration or distorted interpretations. The second (3. 79/73), dating from around March-June 624, puts Islam in the position of a mentor authoritatively admonishing adherents of the earlier religions to refrain from misusing the revelation given to them and from allowing worship given to anyone but God. The third passage (5. 63/68) openly accuses Christian and Jewish functionaries of remissness in instructing their people to avoid sinful speech and unlawful gain. This passage Bell dates from about four years after the text immediately preceding (3. 79/73). Now the rebuke is no longer phrased as an exhortation as in 3. 79/73 but as a bitter complaint ending with an implied threat of punishment because of their remissness.

(116th) 5. 63/68 Why do the (Christian) priests and (Jewish) scholars not forbid them to utter evil and to consume unlawful gain? Evil

16. E.g., in (58th) 26, 196f and (90th) 46. 10/9.
17. Tabarī, ad loc., citing 2. 79/73: "Woe to them because of what their hands have written."
18. For the sense of as-suḥtī, bribe, illicit gain, see Lane, Arabic-English Lexicon, 1:1314, col. 3f, and Blachère, Le Coran, 1125 n.
indeed is what they have been doing.

Besides its occurrence in 5. 44/48 and 5. 63/68, *ahbār*, (Jewish) scholars, is found in two other passages, 9. 31 and 9. 34, both dating from around the time of the Expedition to Tabūk in October-December 630. The two texts were occasioned by a change in Muhammad’s attitude towards Christians. Until this time, while the Qur’ān often criticizes the Jews, there is no evidence of a generally hostile attitude towards Christians. But after the conquest of Mecca in December 629 and the Battle of Ḥunain in January 630, the Christian tribes to the north proved to be unsympathetic to Muhammad’s overtures.

Accordingly, during the preparation for the Expedition to Tabūk, he proclaimed 9. 29-35.\(^{19}\) The whole passage is a declaration of war, but now against Christians as well as Jews. Two of its verses bring severe accusations against both.

(115th) 9. 31 They take their (Jewish) scholars and Christian monks and also Christ, the son of Mary, as lords apart from God, but they were commanded to worship only one God; there is no deity but He... .

This verse rebukes Jews and Christians for obeying their religious mentors who avert them from Islam, claimed by the Qur’ān to be the only true religion. Moreover they refuse obedience to Muhammad, God’s messenger, who presses them to accept the truth as he understands it (v. 33).\(^{20}\) The rebuke continues three verses later:

(115th) 9. 34 O Believers, many of the Jewish scholars and Christian monks consume the people’s money in vanity and obstruct the way of God. To those who lay up gold and silver and do not spend them in God’s cause announce a painful punishment.

While previously (in 5. 63/68) the functionaries failed by not warning their people against unlawful gain, here it is the scholars

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and monks themselves who are accused of accepting bribes for dispensations and also of dissuading people who wish to become Muslims.\(^{21}\) The last part of verse 34 and all of verse 35 may have been suggested by the rebuke here addressed to scholars and monks, but it probably refers to miserly Muslims as well.\(^{22}\)

The proper Syriac term for a Christian priest, *qissis*, occurs only once in the Qur‘an, in a verse dating from around the time (between January and June 624) when Muhammad changed the prayer direction from Jerusalem to Mecca.\(^{23}\) Now the break with the Jews was complete, but as yet there was no worsening of relations between Muslims and Christians.

(116th) 5. 82/85 You will find that the most hostile of men towards the Believers are the Jews and the idolaters. You will find too that those closest in friendship towards the Believers are those who say: We are Christians. This (is so) because there are priests and monks among them and because they do not magnify themselves (against God by rejecting the truth).\(^{24}\)

This description of Christians as well disposed to Muslims recalls the good reception given by the Negus to two groups of Muslims who took refuge from persecution in Abyssinia in 615 and 616. In the years following 624, however, it became clear to Muhammad that, even though they might accept his political advances, the Christians as a group would not admit his religious claims. That some may have done so is here attributed to their priests and monks, whom Zamakhsharī describes as “men of learning” (*‘ulamā‘*) and “servants (of God)” (*‘ibād*).\(^{25}\)

That Muhammad found it necessary to modify this high opinion of monks a few years later appears from a verse (57. 27) from a sura dating in large part from about March to September 625.\(^{26}\)

24. For the translation of *yastakbirūn* as “magnify themselves,” see Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, 2:2585, col. 3; and Paret, *Kommentar*, 128.
Here a passage which in its original form was favorable to Christians received a later addition. It is cited now with the preceding verse which introduces it.

(101st) 57. 26 We formerly sent Noah and Abraham and We appointed the prophetic office and the Scripture (to be established) among the descendants of them both. Among them (the descendants) was an (occasional) one who sought to be rightly guided, but many of them went astray. 27 In their (Noah’s and Abraham’s) footsteps We caused our (other) messengers to follow, and We caused Jesus, Mary’s son, to follow, and We gave him the Gospel, and We put in the hearts of his followers pity and compassion and monasticism which they originated only out of a desire to please God. We did not prescribe it for them. Nevertheless, they did not observe it as it ought to have been observed. To those of them who believed We gave their reward, but many of them went astray.

Only the first part of verse 27, up to “compassion” inclusive, dates from the same time as verse 26. The rest (here indented) is an addition dating probably from October-December 630 during the preparations for the Expedition to Tabûk against the Christians. Several intrinsic reasons support this hypothesis of a later addition to verse 27: (1) instead of a third virtue, God inspires into hearts an institution, monasticism; (2) the rest of the verse does not comment on the main thought of the original verse — other messengers, Jesus, his mission, and the virtues of his followers — but on an institution practiced only by a small proportion of Christians, to which is appended a hostile criticism of their observance of it; (3) the original verse 27 in its first part praises Jesus and his followers and ends by classing his followers with the evil-doers of the previous verse; (4) verse 26 and the first part of verse 27 have a similar content; then both verses are finally rounded off in almost exactly the same way: some few seek truth, many err; some believe, many err. This feature is contrary to Qur’ânic stylistic usage.

27. See Bell, The Qur'ân, 558 and 562.
28. I.e., two homogeneous verses with an identical ending; see Blachère, Le Coran, 920 n.
The other text favorable to Christians in its original form seems to have been part of a Meccan sura but was later revised and incorporated into a Medinan passage. The favorable part of the text is found in four verses, 24. 34-37, which in turn are part of a longer section, verses 34-46/34-45, differing markedly from the rest of the sura.29

(107th) 24. 34 We have revealed to you . . . an example (drawn) from those who passed away before you and a religious exhortation for the God-fearing. 35 God is the light of heaven and earth. His light is like (one in) a niche in which is a lamp . . . kindled from . . . olive . . . oil . . . light upon light, . . . 36 in houses which God allowed to be raised and His name to be commemorated in them. In these (houses), glorifying Him morning and evening, 37 (are) men whom neither commerce nor bargaining divert from the remembrance of God, the observance of the Ritual Prayer, and the Paying of the Legal Alms, fearing (as they do) a (Final) Day when hearts and eyes will be troubled.

Verse 34, which introduces the simile, is almost explicit in referring it to a practice already in use among previous monotheists30 and now proposed as an example to Muslims. The context, including the use of an Abyssinian word for niche and the reference to buildings set apart for morning and evening praise of God, would suggest a description of worship in Christian churches and monasteries. The men not diverted from God’s remembrance by secular pursuits is a quasi-definition of Christian monks.31 The whole Qur’ānic description here could well be based on the recollection of a lighted church and a monastic service in progress. Macdonald even surmises that some of the phrases in the context recall the “light of the world” in the Gospel and “light from light” in the Nicene Creed.32

One phrase in verse 37, “the Observance of the Ritual Prayer and the Paying of Legal Alms,” if part of the original text, would

29. Bell, The Qurān, 335; Blachère, Le Coran, 1011-1016.
make the whole description distinctively Islamic. Watt, however, identifies this phrase as a technical formula occurring thirty-one times in the Qurʾān. Bell regards it as a later insertion made into this verse perhaps between January and October 630, during preparations for the Expedition to Tabūk, when Muhammad’s previous friendly feeling for monks and monasticism was waning.

The original scene here pictured, then, would have been a Christian celebration of the divine office or the Eucharist by monks in their church or oratory. In its revised form it has been given a new character by the mention of two of the five basic duties of Islamic practice, ritual prayer and legal alms. Muhammad in his visits to Syria must on occasion have witnessed Christian liturgical services of the kind suggested here. Some authors have even seen in the prayer gestures and the five times of daily prayer in Islam an adaptation of the choir postures and the canonical hours of the office of the Syriac Christian monks.

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When Muhammad arrived in Medina in September 632, he believed that the teachings he was proclaiming, later gathered together in the Qurʾān, were identical with the monotheistic religion previously revealed to Jews and Christians. At this time some Jews may have been willing to come to a political agreement with him, but most refused to recognize the prophetic mission he claimed. Muhammad then concluded that they had falsified the revelation given to them and expressed his conviction by citing various examples from the Hebrew Bible. He remained on good terms with the Christians for a longer time, but once they had shown themselves unwilling to accept his belief as to what the true religion was, conflict was unavoidable.

The texts commented upon in the foregoing pages show Muhammad’s gradual estrangement from both groups, but especially from the Christians, over a period of several years, roughly from mid-624 to about 630. To illustrate this gradual process as it

affected the Qur’ān the word “revision” has been used in this article, but Muslims do not accept the term. Since, as they hold, the Qur’ān is God’s speech brought word for word to Muhammad by the Angel Gabriel, Muhammad cannot be said to have actively revised the Qur’ān on his own initiative. The Qur’ān itself supports their view:

10. 15/16 When Our verses are recited to them (the unbelievers) as evidences, they . . . say: Bring a Qur’ān other than this or alter it. Answer (O Muhammad): It is not for me to alter it on my own initiative. I follow only what is revealed to me. If I should disobey my Lord, I fear the punishment of a terrible (Dooms-) Day.

Other Qur’ānic verses, however, speak of God’s removing or replacing part of what Muhammad has already proclaimed.

13. 39 God will erase or confirm what He will. . . .

16. 101/103 When We substitute one verse for another — and God best knows what He reveals — they (the unbelievers) say: You (O Muhammad) are only a forger. But most of them do not know (truth from falsehood).

17. 86/88 If We wish, We will indeed take away what We have revealed to you.

The technical term used by Muslims to describe processes like those above italicized or ones similar to them is “the collection” (jam‘) of the Qur’ān. It is sanctioned in the following passage:

75. 17f It is incumbent on Us to collect it (the Qur’ān) and to recite it. So, when We recite it, do you follow its recitation!

The Qur’ān itself in these and other places admits the possibility of some adjustment or modification of its text. So, from the Muslim viewpoint, there is reason to suppose that Muhammad, in what has here been referred to as “revising,” believed that he was carrying out God’s command, “When We recite it, do you follow its recitation!” Some critics, when given these explanations of how passages in the Qur’ān were modified, have accused Mu-
hammad of a deliberate policy of deceit. But such an accusation is in conflict with all the other known facts of Muhammad’s career. 35