

No Power Over God's Bounty: A Christian Commentary on the "People of Scripture" in the Qur'ān, by Pim Valkenberg. Paris: Peeters, 2021. xv + 444 pages. \$103 US. Series: Christian Commentaries on Non-Christian Sacred Texts. ISBN 978 9042941779

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Peacemaking does not profit from avoidance. If interreligious dialogue is a peacemaking endeavor, then it cannot be irenic; it must confront the real disagreements that exist between religious traditions, including emotion-laden disagreements. Dr. Pim Valkenberg, of the Catholic University of America, does exactly this in his volume, *No Power Over God's Bounty: A Christian Commentary on the "People of Scripture" in the Qur'ān*. Here, Valkenberg directly addresses the 31 texts in the Qur'ān that discuss Christians and Jews as "People of Scripture." Valkenberg's phrase "People of Scripture" translates *ahl al-kitāb*, traditionally interpreted as "People of the Book," but Valkenberg prefers the translation "scripture" over "book" since *kitāb* suggests divine revelation (26-27). After analyzing these passages, Valkenberg then moves on to passages with more oblique reference to Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations. These texts acknowledge the special revelation given to Christians and Jews but also criticize them for distorting that revelation. They lie at the heart of Islam's interpretation of its monotheistic predecessors, and their interpretation influences interreligious understanding as well as geopolitical relations. For these reasons, Valkenberg's efforts are timely, daring, and consequential.

Valkenberg explicitly states that the "ultimate goal of this commentary is to contribute to better mutual understanding between Muslims and Christians" (xi). He expresses this desire by beginning, not with a text regarding the people of scripture, which can be quite polemical, but with the first *surah* of the Qur'ān, Al-Fātiḥa or "The Opening." This passage overlaps theologically with Christianity, since both Islam and Christianity appeal, explicitly or implicitly, to God as the merciful "One who guides us," the "lord of the worlds" and "master of the day of judgement" (1). Abiding by the principle of charity, Valkenberg attempts to establish concord before diving into the difficult passages that are to come.

As a commentary on the Qur'ān, Valkenberg's work is exegetical. That is, he proceeds verse by verse through the relevant passages, in much the same way that a Bible commentary would. Each analysis follows a three-step

procedure. First, he provides explanatory notes that focus on philology, examining the specific Arabic words used, the semantic field that they connote, and the varying English translations that they suggest. This analysis provides the reader with a fuller sense of the Arabic meaning of the passage. Second, Valkenberg surveys Islamic interpretation of the passage, noting the well-reasoned arguments as well as points of tension within the tradition. Due to Valkenberg's erudition, these analyses can become quite technical. Third, Valkenberg proposes "Christian resonances" with the Qur'ānic passage, comparisons that the passage evokes. These sections are, by nature, somewhat idiosyncratic. Any one Qur'ānic passage could evoke hundreds of different comparisons, depending on the Christian doing the reading. Valkenberg's comparisons are sound, informative, and stimulating. These sections consist of comparative theology, the generation of insight into each tradition by placing it in light of the other.

Even Valkenberg's charitable selection of Al-Fātiḥa for the opening analysis presents challenges, revealing the trepidatious nature of Muslim-Christian relations. The prayer appears ecumenical; Valkenberg notes that most of his Catholic students believe that they could pray it themselves. But the Islamic interpretive tradition tends to exclusivism. The surah deems certain unnamed groups to be deserving of wrath or to have gone astray. Commentators generally interpret those deserving of wrath to be Jews and those who have gone astray to be Christians (14). This dichotomy begs the questions: What does a text truly mean? And who determines that meaning? Thus, Valkenberg immediately problematizes any *prima facie* interpretation of the Qur'ān as uninformed and perhaps ineffective. Transformation demands substance, and substance will be difficult.

In addition to exegesis, Valkenberg's book also provides a thorough history of Muslim-Christian relations. This history is not presented chronologically but as it pertains to each text under analysis. Thus, the history presented is piecemeal yet compelling due to its effect on interpretation. Valkenberg includes such recent developments as the "Common Word" document released by Muslim leaders in 2007, which provoked considerable – mostly favorable – Christian response. Recognizing the differences between Islam and Christianity, he believes that "Equitable Word" would better translate the Arabic *kalima sawā'* since "equitable word" suggests two traditions speaking their own convictions on the same topic from a position of parity, rather than coming to a tenuous agreement that cannot withstand scrutiny (72–77). In this move, Valkenberg expresses a willingness to challenge popular interreligious initiatives he deems to be inadequately grounded. This occasional contrarianism makes the book much more interesting, if

also a bit deflating for those of us who are sympathetic to any peacemaking effort.

For an example of Valkenberg's method, we can consider chapter six, "A Moderate Religion," in which Valkenberg analyzes Q 4:171 (179–190). This passage addresses the heart of Muslim-Christian disagreement, the Trinity. Indeed, it enjoins Christians, in Valkenberg's translation: "and do not say 'three'/ stop! it is better for you/ since god is a single deity" (179; Valkenberg does not follow conventional rules of capitalization). His explanatory notes point out that, according to Islam, Jesus is one of many prophets sent by God, including Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jonah, and Solomon. Jesus is Messiah (*al-masīḥ*), the son of Mary, a messenger (*rasūl*) of God, a word of God (*kalimātuhu*), and a spirit (*rūḥ*) from God. But Jesus is *not* the Son of God, who is above having a child. In the section on Islamic interpretations, Valkenberg points out that Q 4:171 was not a focus of commentary in the early Islamic tradition. As it came to the attention of commentators, they generally condemned Christianity for *shirk* – idolatry or polytheism. The more recent *Study Quran* (2017) is more generous in its interpretation, however, asserting that orthodox Christology is compatible with monotheism. In the section on Christian resonances, Valkenberg examines Christian commentary on Q 4:171 by John of Damascus, Nicholas of Cusa, and Karl Rahner. Valkenberg then critiques tripersonal interpretations of the Trinity as implicitly tritheistic (7). Instead, he commends those interpretations that emphasize the one over the three. These interpretations offer the added benefit of facilitating dialogue between Muslims and Christians. Such dialogue will prove challenging and may even be infected by rivalry, but Valkenberg offers an eschatological hope that all rivalry will turn to rejoicing in the final beatific vision. As a Catholic, he notes that the Qur'ān shares this hope: "You will all return to God, and He will inform you concerning that about which you differ" (380; Q 5:48b).

Valkenberg's work raises certain questions about the relationship between tradition and progress. If analyzing the Qur'ān's interpretation of the People of Scripture, which aspect of the tradition should be emphasized? Valkenberg has paid attention to a variety of approaches and has focused on the demographic center of the Islamic tradition, generally emphasizing established Sunni exegesis. Though this approach is academically warranted, certain Muslim scholars today are providing explicitly pluralistic interpretations of the Qur'ān. Mohammed Hashim Kamali, Ali Asani, Mahmoud Ayoub, Abdulaziz Sachedina, and others have all argued that the Qur'ān commends both civilizational and theological pluralism. While they are not excluded from Valkenberg's analysis, I would have preferred a more thorough engagement with their contemporary thought, especially given (for

example) the relatively frequent references to exclusivist thinkers such as Ibn Kathīr and Sayyid Quṭb.

That being said, Valkenberg provides an excellent introduction to the Qur'ān's interpretation of the People of Scripture. He is immensely learned and his book exhaustively researched. For these reasons, *No Power Over God's Bounty* will remain a standard of Muslim-Christian studies for years to come.