

# EIKŌN AND ĀYAT

## Encounter between Indonesian Christian and Muslim Perspectives on Jesus

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Indonesia is the country with the largest Muslim population in the world. Muslims form about 88 per cent of the population (of around 240 million people), whereas Christians (consisting of several denominations) make up about 8 per cent.

Relations between Muslims and Christians have often slipped into a tense situation. The causes of their strained relations are complicated. However, without ignoring the other factors, this study deliberately tries to focus only on doctrinal difference concerning the doctrine of God and Christology. The aim is to propose an experiment of doctrinal dialogue between the two faiths, which up to the present has often been regarded as a taboo.

From this study we find that, on the one hand, the Reformed Churches in Indonesia maintain the doctrine of the Trinity and hold on to the Christology of the Reformed doctrinal standards and those of the ecumenical symbols. Muslims in Indonesia, on the other hand, put a strong emphasis on the oneness, uniqueness, transcendence, and utter otherness of God. God is one and unique, has no partner and no equal. They, therefore, repudiate vigorously the Christian belief in the Trinity. Indeed, they revere Jesus and acknowledge his miraculous birth and the miracles he performed. They also acknowledge that the spirit of God strengthened Jesus, so that he could perform signs and miracles. For them, however, Jesus was not the Son of God, but a human being, a prophet like the other prophets. To acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God means to identify God with creation. That is a shirk, an unforgivable sin that cannot be tolerated.

### What do their Scriptures say about Jesus?

In the Christ-hymn of the epistle to the Colossians we find a monotheistic Christology. The hymn identifies Jesus with Wisdom as a manner God used to communicate with, and to reveal Himself to, human beings. Christ's roles are seen as the full manifestation of Wisdom's roles. God Who was in the past pleased to manifest God's presence and God's will through Wisdom, now does so through Christ. God's creative power as shown in creation, revelations, and God's salvific act for God's people were now manifested fully and exclusively in Christ. Through the hymn, Christ is praised as God's revealer. Although the hymn uses not only a wisdom language, but also a pre-existence-language, as though Christ is the incarnation of divine Wisdom and is pre-existent, it does not pay any attention to Christ's nature ontologically, but rather to Christ's role and significance in God's eternal plan as a whole. The hymn is intended to praise and glorify God, who always intervenes in world history, and not at all to define or conceptualize God's being or God's nature.

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The essence of the hymn is to speak of God's activities for presenting and communicating Godself to human beings through all God's works in Jesus Christ.

In Sura Maryam, we also find expression of the same tone. This Sura teaches the readers of the magnanimity, the omnipotence and the oneness of God. In connection with Jesus, this Sura puts emphasis on the humanity of Jesus. By emphasizing the humanity of Jesus, it wants to assert the oneness of God: there is no God but Allah. Jesus' confirmation of himself, that he was a messenger and prophet of God, designates that he was only human. This Sura stresses that Jesus is one in a longer list of messengers of God. God had given him revelation and made him a prophet. To speak of Jesus in the Qur'an is, first of all, to speak of a prophet. Jesus, referred to in the Qur'an as Isa ibn Maryam (Jesus the son of Mary), is one of the greatest of the prophets of God whom Muslims hold in very deep love and respect. He was sent by God to be a sign for men. That is why the Qur'an gives a greater number of honourable titles to Jesus than to any other figure of the past.

What is interesting is that Sura Maryam puts forward two important roles of Jesus as 'a sign' of God unto men, and as 'a mercy' from God. Unfortunately, neither Muslim commentators on the Qur'an nor the Qur'an itself elaborates these two significant roles of Jesus adequately. We know that a 'sign' does not only function as a 'token' or a 'hint,' but also gives guidance or a guideline for people. In line with that, Jesus is also called 'a messenger' of God. God has made him a prophet, and given him revelation to be delivered to humankind. He was a person God chose to be God's arm in order to give guidance to humankind.

### **To understand Jesus better**

From the testimonies of both scriptures, we can see clearly that in fact both the Qur'an and the New Testament revere Jesus. Both acknowledge Jesus' pre-eminence among Gods' prophets and messengers. This is among other things seen from the titles applied to him but not to other prophets. If we observe carefully, it is clear that in spite of all the differences there is much in common about the meaning of the titles applied to him between the New Testament and the Qur'an. From these titles it is evident that both Scriptures demonstrate Jesus' role or function and his honoured position before God and humankind. All titles applied to him reflect God's communication of Godself to the world, so that to speak of Jesus' role within God's economy means to speak of God's communication to humankind. Both Scriptures testify to Jesus' role as God's revealer, who manifests God's word and performs God's will. That is why in Colossians he is called eikōn of God and in Sura Maryam he is called āyat Allah.

More than that, speaking of Jesus' role means speaking of the teaching he has delivered through his very life and ministry, which is no other than the word and will of God. Therefore, to understand Jesus means to understand his teachings and examples or to understand God's word and will that were revealed through him.

Furthermore, to understand him means to follow his pathway. These apply for both Muslims and Christians, if they both really revere him as a prophet and messenger of God. Either Muslims or Christians would understand Jesus better, if they see Jesus in the

framework of God's revelation for humankind. Only by taking such an attitude would we be able to grasp Jesus' significance for our collective life in Indonesia, even in the world today.

## **Conclusion**

First, we should realize that doctrinally, besides some similarities, there are also different perspectives about God and Jesus between Christians and Muslims in Indonesia, which can only be bridged by their openness to reinterpret their respective doctrines, and to study seriously their Scriptures.

Second, we have the impression that there is a similarity of opinion between the Qur'ân and the New Testament about Jesus' significance for the benefit of humanity. Both Scriptures testify to Jesus' role and function as God's revealer, God's presenter, who manifests God's self and word, and performs God's will. Moreover, considering his exemplary life, we can call him a model or an example for the believers.

Third, in our modern world, there is a very new use of the word 'icon', a translation of both *eikôn* and *âyat*, as a model or sign for an unseen world. In a more consistent way Jesus can be seen as the 'icon' of the ideal human being, and as the image of the invisible God. Besides, in his unique relationship with God, Jesus bears witness to the truth of God, so that there is nothing wrong in calling him the 'unique witness of God,' who is properly called the '*eikôn*' or '*âyat*' of God. He is the real 'icon' and as such he can frankly be adored by both communities of faith.