

## I. Common Roots, Radical Challenges

The *shahada* of Islam begins with the refrain, “There is no god but God...” Likewise the Nicene Creed begins with the confession, “I believe in one God...” Both religions confess the supreme reality of the one God who created the heavens and the earth. Within the Semitic ethos of the Quran, the Christian also finds much to affirm, particularly the commonality of the faith of Abraham. This is fittingly encapsulated in the *Al-Fatihah*, the gateway or essence of the Quran.

In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful.  
Praise be to Allah, The Cherisher and Sustainer of the Worlds;  
Most Gracious, Most Merciful;  
Master of the Day of Judgment.  
Thee do we worship, and Thine aid we seek.  
Show us the straight way,  
The way of those on whom, Thou has bestowed Thy Grace,  
Those whose (portion) is not wrath, and who go not astray.

I imagine that the recitation of this verse at a Christian Sunday meeting might just be acceptable if the word ‘Allah’ is replaced with the English equivalent of ‘God’, and if the congregation is not told that the verse is taken from the Quran.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, the word ‘Allah’, especially when uttered in its Semitic guttural tone, is a fitting carrier for the forceful and dynamic vitality of incomparable Divinity. The Christian resonates too with those Quranic passages which proclaim with concrete imagery the God of justice and judgment, the God of mercy who is concerned for widows and the social underclass. Can any Christian disagree with Islam’s insistence on the oneness of God, the sovereign Creator God who reveals because of his mercy towards wayward humans? Should not the Christian be grateful for the stubbornness with which Muslims insist our ultimate accountability to the ‘Master of the Day of Judgment’?

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<sup>2</sup> I am mindful that classical commentators like Ibn Kathir interpret the last verse as a rejection of Christians and Jews because they are misguided objects of Allah’s wrath.

## A. Disturbing Concerns and Unsettled Questions

Unfortunately, any encounter with Semitic Islam is soon overwhelmed by the austere stream of legalistic and rationalistic Islam. One seeks in vain for a Semitic familiarity of God in later Islamic dogma. In its place one finds cold dogma as well as an unyielding legal system that seeks to regulate every detail of life. Submission is demanded not only to God but to his earthly deputies. Seekers may not critique Islam; they should acknowledge the linguistic supremacy of the Quran and the Sunnah. In particular, Islamists insist that all culture must be Arabicised precisely because the final and perfect revelation has been given via dictation in Arabic and embodied in the exemplary life of the Prophet. We sense an immediate contrast to Christianity's celebration of 'local knowledge' and contextualization of faith.<sup>3</sup>

How are we to respond to the imperial demands of Islam in the name of linguistic and religious supremacy? Kenneth Cragg's rejoinder is both precise and decisive:

A universal revelation, using a language in this way unilaterally, would need to employ a universal one. No such universal language exists. Any revelatory language must surely be susceptible of translation within a multilingual humanity. It needs to be viable and capable of obedience within all the exigencies of human grammars and cultures, in potential correlation to all the vagaries of society and history.<sup>4</sup>

We can appreciate Islam's concern that believers are vulnerable to the temptation to remake God according to their own image. In reaction, Islam demands that all language that 'refers' to God be qualified so as to avoid any association between Allah and creation. But this threatens to render all Islamic discourse meaningless. To be sure, some quarters allow for the doctrine of *Al-Mukhalafah* and

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<sup>3</sup> See Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Orbis, 2009).

**130** <sup>4</sup> Kenneth Cragg, *The Christ and the Faiths* (SPCK, 1986), p. 55.

*bila tashbih*, the idea that terms derived from human meanings may be applied to God ‘with a difference’.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the concession assumes that only God can specify wherein the difference lies. But would not such a move effectively reduce Islamic discourse to reverent agnosticism?

Therein lies a fundamental difference between Christianity and Islam. For Islam, not only is God hidden, but he is also cloaked in a sense of mystery. The mysteriousness of God robed in unapproachable light is, after all, also familiar to the prophets of the Old Testament. But Islam goes all the way by insisting that as creatures we can never ever know the personality of God. However, for Christianity, God has revealed his personality through Jesus Christ who is the Incarnation of God in history. Christianity not only affirms the transcendence of God, but it also affirms the omnipresence of God and his immanence within creation. The transcendence of God should not result in a metaphysical dichotomy between God and the world. Otherwise, the purported revelation of God would be reduced to a language game illusion. God becomes a shrouded mystery enclosed in linguistic metaphors. A God isolated from his creation renders him irrelevant. Indeed, one may argue that any theology bereft of a genuine anchor in creation becomes an abstraction. Conversely, an unmitigated transcendence of God would rob creation of its ontological grounding. The meaning of a created world that is continually dependent on the sustenance of God is undermined. In other words, if nothing can be related to God then the unity of all things under God becomes problematic. Hendrikus Berkhof provides an instructive contrast when he admirably described the Christian teaching of plurality and unity of creation.

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<sup>5</sup> Cragg explains, “*Al-Mukhalafah* means the necessary distinction to be made between the ostensible meaning of theological language and the feasible meaning, the latter being inaccessible to thought. *Bila tashbih* means ‘without similarity implied’. Linked with *bila kaif* (‘without asking how’) it admits of the use of language about God while reserving it from its normal import. In this way it is held possible to avoid what otherwise would be *shirk*, namely causing God to share in human descriptive.” See Kenneth Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim: An Exploration* (Allen & Unwin, 1985), p. 208

The createdness of the world implies the fundamental unity of the world. More basic than the diversity of nations, races and cultures, is their unity. And more basic than the difference in matter of spirit, body and soul, nature and existence, is their oneness...creation means that all phenomena are irreducible, because the world has its ground outside itself in its creator. Everything forms a unity, but within it everything also has its own place and character <sup>6</sup>

Islam stands out as a total system with its all-inclusiveness in the contemporary world of fragmentation and relativism. Islam rejects the fragmentation of modern life with the battle cry that there is no separation between secular and sacred in life. Such a battle cry, however, would generate dissonance to the observer who is impressed by the pervasive sacramentalism of Islam with its prayer rituals and demarcation between clean and unclean, the prohibited and the permitted. The nagging quandary arises, “if everything is sacred, then surely, nothing is sacred in the end.”

The question points to the clue behind the motivation that drives Islamic totality, which is a zeal for the sovereignty of God. For Islam, all of history and every aspect of life must be reclaimed for God; after all, Islam means submission. Hence, Islam disdains contemporary Christianity for having lost its nerve in abdicating and failing to assert itself in the public square. Islam just cannot understand how one can maintain moral integrity if one has no sense of righteous anger in the face of decadence and godlessness which it perceives to be rampant in Western societies. The failure of Christianity in the West confirms the inadequacy of the Christian proclamation of love. Christian love which makes itself vulnerable will only undermine the weightiness of truth and thus its ability to change and regulate social life. In contrast, Islamic revelation as truth and righteous power cannot lose its struggle. Divine truth confirms itself. Hence, for Muslims the very earthly success of Muhammad constitutes the seal or ‘finality’ of his prophethood.

Islam naturally maintains optimism regarding the efficacy of divine revelation. For Islam God cannot abandon his prophets especially given its optimism in the efficacy of prophetic proclamation. There is no need for concession to be granted to Caesar, not even a provisional concession. Again, there is an absence of eschatological reserve in the religious enterprise. Truth manifests power and power confirms truth for the Islamic enterprise on earth.

The challenge for Christians is how to commend the crucified savior to Muslims who evaluate the veracity of God's revelation on the basis of its immediate success. We note that there is a prominent stream of Muslim theology which regards Jesus primarily as a sufi who is deep in the practice of spirituality. However, while Jesus' message of love may win a few receptive hearts, it cannot overcome the entrenched power of the Roman Empire or the recalcitrance of the Jews. Kenneth Cragg notes how Muslims like to contrast the meekness of Jesus with the robust activism of Muhammad. Indeed, it is precisely the 'manifest success' of Muhammad which enables Muslims to affirm with confidence the "finality of his [Muhammad's] prophethood." In contrast, "Jesus, in the circumstances of his day and the providence of God, was not granted that evident external vindication."<sup>7</sup>

The perceived failure of Jesus' historic mission naturally renders him inferior to Muhammad whom Muslims regard as the universal exemplar.

## **B. Which Jesus?**

### *1. Only a prophet?*

How then do we recommend Jesus to Muslims if they have already arrived at the conclusion that Jesus is inferior to Muhammad based on the earthly outcome of their respective mission? The Christian would argue that perhaps Islam has misjudged Jesus because it is

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<sup>7</sup> Kenneth Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim*, p. 43.

informed by the wrong criterion. The assumption of Islam is that the mission of Jesus ended with his crucifixion. This assessment is surely short-sighted as it ignores the prophecy given by Jesus himself that he will extend his mission after his resurrection. The fact is that the Church, which was started by Jesus, outlasted the Roman Empire and continues to transform nations. Furthermore, Christianity boasts to be the largest world religion today. Indeed, the very pragmatic criterion that Islam relies on would confirm that the mission of Christ is a success. The traditional judgment of Islam that Jesus's mission is a failure must therefore be deemed to be invalidated. The challenge for Muslims is to go beyond their rejection of Jesus based on a preconceived Islamic doctrine and to view afresh the actual life that Jesus has lived out in history. Such a respectful handling and faithful interpretation of the historical data will certainly lead them to a new appreciation of Jesus as the final revelation of God. The question remains, "what manner of man was Jesus and why did his followers conclude that he is God revealed to man?"

First, all of Jesus' hearers were impressed by his unconventional wisdom. It is reported that he confounded the learned teachers of Israel in his debates with them. Indeed, they were astounded by the authority with which he offered his profound wisdom. Unlike normal teachers who merely quoted from earlier teachers, Jesus pronounced acute and astute judgments on spiritual controversies and acted with uncharacteristic ethical authenticity. Such were the hallmarks of any prophet. Jesus was naturally acknowledged as a prophet of God in the Gospels and observers found in his life an incomparable spiritual reality. It is not enough to give Jesus feign praise by calling him a teacher and a genius of religious insights. He was undeniably the Word of God walking in the midst of humanity.

Second, unlike other religious teachers, Jesus confirmed his words with miraculous deeds. He urged the stubborn Jews who had difficulty accepting his words to believe on the basis of his miraculous works. On the other hand, the miracles must be viewed

in proper perspective. After all, taken to the logical extreme, they demand that Jesus' ministry be measured in terms of immediate and worldly success. It would be to underestimate the recalcitrant nature of sinful human beings to think that they are easily amenable to spiritual guidance with a simple demonstration of spiritual power. One has only to recall the story of Pharaoh's rejection of Moses to find evidence of the stubbornness of unbelief in the face of miracles.

Bearers of spiritual tidings know well the temptation to reach out to the rich and powerful as the best strategy to achieve worldly success. This may explain the human tendency to measure the success of Jesus' mission based on its ability to wield political power. But would not this amount to attributing to politics an ultimate importance in earthly life beyond what should be the case? To be sure, this does not preclude the eventual implementation of such power by Jesus but this will only be fulfilled in the eschatological Kingdom of God and in God's own time.

The Christian should explore other avenues to find common grounds in his attempt to build bridges to Muslims. This includes the Virgin Birth, the spiritual authenticity and sinlessness of Jesus, his ascension and his second coming in order to understand rightly the full stature of Jesus. There remains difficulties arising from differing expectations held by Christians and Muslims regarding how the prophethood of Jesus should be validated in the light of the outcome of his mission and the effectiveness of Jesus' followers in the world. Christians seek to relativize worldly power in judging the sword of Caesar to be efficacious only for temporal rule. For the Christian, God operates in his kingdom with means least expected by worldly wisdom. The case is most clearly demonstrated in the ministry of Jesus. It is unfortunate that preoccupation with political power can sidetrack one from a personal encounter with the full personality of Jesus. As countless testimonies confirm to be the case, anyone who is confronted by the full personality of Jesus in the Gospels experiences his moral and spiritual power so that he is compelled to ask the question, "Could he be more than a prophet?"