



Jesus: the Muslim prophet

Christianity is rooted in the belief that Jesus is the Son of God, so is Islam's version of Christ a source of tension, or a way of bridge between the world's two largest faiths?

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Christians, perhaps because they call themselves Christians and believe in Christianity, like to claim ownership of Christ. But the veneration of Jesus by Muslims began during the lifetime of the Prophet of Islam. Perhaps most telling is the story in the classical biographies of Muhammad, who, entering the city of Mecca in triumph in 630AD, proceeded at once to the Kaaba to cleanse the holy shrine of its idols. As he walked around, ordering the destruction of the pictures and statues of the 360 or so pagan deities, he came across a fresco on the wall depicting the Virgin and Child. He is said to have covered it reverently with his cloak and decreed that all other paintings be washed away except that one.

Jesus, or Isa, as he is known in Arabic, is deemed by Islam to be a Muslim prophet rather than the Son of God, or God incarnate. He is referred to by name in as many as 25 different verses of the Quran and six times with the title of "Messiah" (or "Christ", depending on which Quranic translation is being used). He is also referred to as the "Messenger" and the "Prophet" but, perhaps above all else, as the "Word" and the "Spirit" of God. No other prophet in the Quran, not even Muhammad, is given this particular honour. In fact, among the 124,000 prophets said to be recognised by Islam - a figure that includes all of the Jewish prophets of the Old Testament - Jesus is considered second only to Muhammad, and is believed to be the precursor to the Prophet of Islam.

In his fascinating book *The Muslim Jesus*, the former Cambridge professor of Arabic and Islamic studies Tarif Khalidi brings together, from a vast range of sources, 303 stories, sayings and traditions of Jesus that can be found in Muslim literature, from the earliest history. These paint a picture of Christ not dissimilar to the Christ of the Gospels. The Muslim Jesus is the patron saint of asceticism, the lord of nature, a moral, spiritual and social role model.

"Jesus used to eat the leaves of the trees," reads one saying, "dress in hairshirts, and sleep wherever night found him. He had no child who might die, no house ruin; nor did he save his lunch for his dinner or his dinner for his lunch. He used to say, 'Each day brings with it its own sustenance.'"

According to Islamic theology, Christ did not bring a new revealed law, or reform an earlier law, but introduced a new path or way (*tariqah*) based on the love of God. This is the reason that he has been adopted by the mystics, or Sufis, of Islam. The Sufi philosopher al-Ghazali described Jesus as "the prophet of the soul" and the Sufis called him "the seal of saints". The Jesus of Islamic Sufism, as Khalidi notes, is a figure "not easily distinguished" from the Jesus of the Gospels.

What prompted Khalidi to write such a provocative book? "We need to be reminded of a history that told a very different story: how one religion, Islam, co-opted Christianity yet still maintained him as an independent hero of the struggle between the spirit and the letter of the law," he told me. "It is in many ways a remarkable encounter, of one religion fortifying its own piety by adopting and cherishing the master spiritual narrative of another religion."

Islam reveres both Jesus and his mother, Mary (Joseph appears nowhere in the Islamic narrative of Christ's birth). "Unlike the canonical Gospels, the Quran tilts the focus away from his Passion, and forward to his birth," writes Khalidi. "This is why he is often referred to as 'the son of Mary' and why he and his mother feature so prominently in Islamic tradition. In fact, the Virgin Mary, or Maryam, as she is known in the Quran, is considered by Muslims to hold the most exalted spiritual position among women. She is mentioned by name in Islam's holy book and a chapter of the Quran is named after her. In one oft-cited tradition, the Prophet Muhammad described her as one of the greatest women in human history.

But the real significance of Mary is that Islam considers her a virgin and endorses the Christian concept of the Virgin Birth. "She was the chosen woman, chosen without a husband," says Shaykh Ibrahim Mogra, an imam in Leicester and assistant secretary general of the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB). This is the orthodox Islamic position, and, paradoxically, as Seyyed Hossein Nasr notes in *The Heart of Islam*, "respect for such teachings is so strong among Muslims that today, in interreligious dialogue, Muslims are often left defending traditional . . . Christian doctrines such as the miraculous birth of Christ before modernist interpreters would reduce them to mere legends."

With Christianity and Islam so intricately linked, it might make sense for Muslim communities across Europe, harassed, harangued and often under siege, to do so. There is a common religious heritage, and especially the shared love for Jesus and Mary. There is a renowned historical precedent for this from the life of the Prophet. In his mission in Mecca, Muhammad decided to find a safer refuge for those of his followers who had been exposed to the worst persecution from his opponents in the Quraysh. He asked the Negus, the Christian king of Abyssinia (modern-day Ethiopia), to take them in. He agreed and more than 80 Muslims left Mecca with a friendly reception that greeted them upon arrival in Abyssinia so alarmed the Quraysh that, worried about the prospects of Muhammad's Muslims winning more converts, they sent two delegates to the court of the Negus to persuade him to extradite them back to Mecca. The Muslim refugees, claiming the Quraysh were blasphemers and fugitives, asked the Negus to answer the charges. Jafar explained that Muhammad was a prophet of the same God who had appeared to Jesus, and recited aloud the Quranic account of the virginal conception of Christ in the womb of Mary:



And make mention of Mary in the Scripture, when she had withdrawn from her people to a chamber looking East,



And had chosen seclusion from them. Then We sent unto her Our Spirit and it assumed for her the likeness of a perfect man.

She said: Lo! I seek refuge in the Beneficent One from thee, if thou art God-fearing.

He said: I am only a messenger of thy Lord, that I may bestow on thee a faultless son.

She said: How can I have a son when no mortal hath touched me, neither have I been unchaste?

He said: So (it will be). Thy Lord saith: It is easy for Me. And (it will be) that We may make of him a revelation for mankind and a mercy from Us, and it is a thing of Quran, 19:16-21

Karen Armstrong writes, in her biography of Muhammad, that "when Jafar finished, the beauty of the Quran had done its work. The Negus was weeping so hard, and the tears poured down the cheeks of his bishops and advisers so copiously that their scrolls were soaked." The Muslims remained in Abyssinia, under the Negus, and were able to practise their religion freely.

However, for Muslims, the Virgin Birth is not evidence of Jesus's divinity, only of his unique importance as a prophet and a messiah. The Trinity is rejected by Crucifixion and Resurrection. The common theological ground seems to narrow at this point - as Jonathan Bartley, co-director of the Christian think tank Ekklesia, says. The Resurrection is the "deal-breaker". He adds: "There is a fundamental tension at the heart of interfaith dialogue that neither side wants to face up to, and that is the Christian view of Jesus is blasphemous to Muslims and the orthodox Muslim view of Jesus is blasphemous to Christians." He has a point. The Quran singles out formulating the concept of the Trinity:

Do not say, "Three" - Cease! That is better for you. God is one God. Glory be to Him, [high exalted is He] above having a son.

Quran 4:171

It castigates Christianity for the widespread practice among its sects of worshipping Jesus and Mary, and casts the criticism in the form of an interrogation of Jesus:

And when God will say: "O Jesus, son of Mary, did you say to the people, 'Take me and my mother as gods besides God?'" he will say, "Glory be to You, it was not for me to say what I had no right [to say]! If I had said it, You would have known it.

Quran 5:116

Jesus, as Khalidi points out, "is a controversial prophet. He is the only prophet in the Quran who is deliberately made to distance himself from the doctrines that he holds of him." For example, Muslims believe that Jesus was not crucified but was raised bodily to heaven by God.

Yet many Muslim scholars have maintained that the Islamic conception of Jesus - shorn of divinity; outside the Trinity; a prophet - is in line with the beliefs at the earliest Jewish-Christian sects, such as the Ebionites and the Nazarenes, who believed Jesus to be the Messiah, but not divine. Muslims claim the Muslim Jesus, stripped of a later, man-made "Christology": "Jesus as he might have been without St Paul or St Augustine or the Council of Nicaea", to quote the Cambridge Islamicist, Casey.

Or, as A N Wilson wrote in the *Daily Express* a decade ago: "Islam is a moral and intellectual acknowledgement of the lordship of God without the encumbrance of mythological baggage . . . That is why Christianity will decline in the next millennium, and the religious hunger of the human heart will be answered by the Creator. Despite the major doctrinal differences, there remain areas of significant overlap, such as on the second coming of Christ. Both Muslims and Christians subscribe to the belief that before the world ends Jesus will return to defeat the Antichrist, whom Muslims refer to as Dajjal."

The idea of a Muslim Jesus, in whatever doctrinal form, may help fortify the resolve of those scholars who talk of the need to reformulate the exclusivist concept of a Judeo-Christian-Muslim civilisation and refer instead to a "Judeo-Christian-Muslim civilisation". This might be anathema to evangelical Christians - especially in the US, where populist Franklin Graham sees Islam as a "very evil and wicked religion" - but, as Khalidi points out, "While the Jewish tradition by and large rejects Jesus, the Islamic tradition or mystical Islam, constructs a place for him at the very centre of its devotions."

Nonetheless, Jesus remains an esoteric part of Islamic faith and practice. Where, for example, is the Islamic equivalent of Christmas? Why do Muslims celebrate the birth of Prophet Muhammad but not that of the Prophet Jesus? "We, too, in our own way should celebrate the birth of Jesus . . . [because] he is so special to us," says Casey. "Each religious community has distinct celebrations, so Muslims will celebrate their own and Christians their own."

In recent years, the right-wing press in Britain has railed against alleged attempts by "politically correct" local authorities to downplay or even suppress Christmas. In Luton, to name its seasonal celebrations "Winterval" and Luton's Harry Potter-themed lights, or "Luminos", are notorious examples. There is often a sense that such a fear that outward displays of Christian faith might offend British Muslim sensibilities, but, given the importance of Jesus in Islam, such fears seem misplaced. MCB's interfaith relations committee, concurs: "It's a ridiculous suggestion to change the name of Christmas." He adds: "Britain is great when it comes to celebrating the festivals of our various faith communities. They should remain named as they are, and we should celebrate them all."

Mogra is brave to urge Muslims to engage in an outward and public celebration of Jesus, in particular his birth, in order to match the private reverence that Muslims have for him. Is there a danger, however, that Muslim attempts to re-establish the importance of Jesus within Islam and as an integral part of their faith and tradition might be misconstrued as part of a campaign by a supposedly resurgent and politicised Islam to try to take "ownership" of Jesus, in a western world in which Christianity is in seeming decline? Might it be counterproductive for interfaith relations? Church leaders, thankfully, seem to disagree.

"I have always enjoyed spending time with Muslim friends, with whom we as Christians have so much in common, along with Jewish people, as we all trace our roots to Abraham," the Archbishop of York, Dr John Sentamu, tells me. "When I visit a mosque, having been welcomed in the name of 'Allah and His Prophet Muhammad', I respond with greetings 'in the name of Jesus Christ, whom you Muslims revere as a prophet, and whom I know as the Saviour of the World, the Prince of Peace'."

Amid tensions between the Christian west and the Islamic east, a common focus on Jesus - and what Khalidi calls a "salutary" reminder of when Christianity was open to each other and willing to rely on each other's witness - could help close the growing divide between the world's two largest faiths. Mogra agrees: "We do

Jesus. He is special for Christians and Muslims. He is bigger than life. We can share him."

Reverend David Marshall, one of the Church of England's specialists on Islam, cites the concluding comments from the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams for Christian and Muslim scholars. He said he had been encouraged by "the quality of our disagreement". "Christians and Muslims disagree on many points and but how we disagree is not predetermined," says Marshall. "Muslims are called by the Quran to 'argue only in the best way with the People of the Book' [Quran are encouraged to give reasons for the hope that is within them, 'with gentleness and reverence' [1 Peter 3:15]. If we can do this, we have no reason to be afraid

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