

A Christian's response to Isa, the Prophet of Islam

Where am I coming from?

- Difficulties of language – use of metaphor, not a literalist.
- Recognition that there are a variety of opinions.
- The provisional nature of theology, therefore, the importance of exploration.
- How can finite human-beings understand the nature of an infinite God or 'his' workings?
- 'God' as the basis of life, i.e. life-giving source; as one who communicates, not an absentee-landlord sort of being but one with whom a relationship of trust and is possible; as one who has been, is, and will be 'present'.
- What constitutes 'faith'? Is it a cerebral acceptance of a system of beliefs? Is it a matter of trust in the purposes of 'God'?
- Some of the theological concepts inherent in the Christian faith would be considered by Muslims to be *shirk*. They are central to the Christian faith and my use of them is not intended to offend or disrespect Islam but not to deal with them would be equally offensive to my Christian colleagues. I, therefore, seek to make an honest witness to my faith with which others, both Muslim and Christian may disagree but which I hope, is given the manner the Bible recommends, that is, with 'gentleness and respect'.

What do I understand to be Muslim portrayals of Jesus/Isa?

(Not an exhaustive analysis.)

He is a prophet, one in a line of prophets sent by God (3.84f; 4.163; 5.46). He was an apostle sent to the children of Israel (3.49; 4.157; 5.75; 61.6) and to him a special message was given – the Injil or Gospel (3.48; 5.46; 19.30; 57.27). In it was a warning for the God-fearing and it confirmed the Torah (3.50; 5.46). A strict monotheist (3.51), he called people, as did other prophets, to surrender (Islam) to the will of God (5.116f; 26.108; 43.63).

Some prophets, however, are considered to be 'more excellent' than others (17.55) and amongst these was Jesus. God had made a covenant with him (33.7). He was born of a virgin (34.7), spoke from the cradle (3.46) and both he and his mother were protected from Satan (3.36). He was faultless and pure (19.19) and was brought near to God (3.45), and he was very much human, he and his mother 'both had to eat' (5.75).

Titles of Jesus:

Messiah: It is considered an honourific term showing that Jesus was blessed and the source of blessings. Some consider the term to derive from the Arabic *msh*

meaning 'one cleansed from every blemish and sin', others think it derives from the verb *saha* meaning 'to wonder' or 'roam', whilst others associate it with the Hebrew verb meaning 'to anoint', i.e. Jesus was anointed – equipped for the ministry of prophethood and teaching.

Word: Jesus is regarded as a word, not the word. It would appear that the term has more to do with God's intervention in the birth of Jesus, demonstrating God's creative power and unconditional freedom. God says, 'Be', and it is. The Virgin Birth is affirmed in the Qur'an and Jesus is referred to as 'a word from God'.

Spirit: Equal uncertainty surrounds this concept. In 4.171, there is a reference to Jesus' being a *ruh* (spirit) from God. In 66.12 God says 'we breathed into Mary [something] of our spirit'. To Muslims this does not mean that Jesus is divine or that he should be identified with God's spirit. Jesus may be regarded as a spirit proceeding from God, but not God *per se*. That would be regarded as *shirk* – associating another being with the being of God. That, in Muslim eyes, is the worst possible sin.

Muslim responses to the Quranic Christ

Jesus is considered to be a significant prophet because of his exalted position, an exceptional 'event' in history because he had a miraculous birth. He is believed to have been capable of raising the dead and is regarded as having no precedent in human history.

However, Jesus' birth was no more miraculous than that of Adam who had neither father nor mother. Further there are matters about Jesus which Muslims strongly deny. We have already seen that associating another being with the being of God is considered to be most sinful. Consequently it is regarded as blasphemy to 'raise Jesus to the level of God' (5.17). Nor indeed would any Muslim use the term 'Son of God' (6.101ff; 19.92; 112.3). Perhaps the point of greatest difference is the outright rejection of the crucifixion:

[T]hey did not slay him, and neither did they crucify him, but it only seemed to them [as if it had been] so. (4.157)

It is claimed by some that Jesus was 'raptured' from the cross and taken into heaven. There is further a denial of the atonement since Judgement Day is '...a day on which no soul hath power at all for any other soul.' (82.19)

For Muslims Jesus is nothing other than mortal. Claims for divinity are anathema. Jesus was a servant, a notion that affirms humanity and the dependence of Jesus upon God. He had to eat (5.75) unlike God and the angels who need no food (11.70).

Jesus is said to have announced the coming of Muhammad (61.6) and consequently his being regarded as paradigmatic is called into question. Note that Muhammad's message is not new. It is one of establishing radical obedience to God (6.163-166) and his role is not that of establishing a new religion but that of confirming and restoring the primordial monotheism or 'eternal religion' that had been established since the time of Adam. Associated with this is the issue of 'success'. It is part of

Quranic doctrine that simply delivering the message is not enough and to suffer frustration and not to succeed is failure and immature spirituality. Thus Muhammad needed to succeed. Jesus had failed because he was sentenced to death. The 'evident success' of Muhammad confirmed him, in Muslim eyes as 'the seal of the prophets'.

Muhammad is seen by Muslims as the one who came to correct and fulfil the message which had been laid upon Jesus but this has not been acknowledged by Christians. For Muslims Islam is seen as the most adequate and perfect religion. Hence Jesus is not paradigmatic for Muslims whereas Muhammad is certainly so. The prophet Muhammad is said to be identified in two biblical verses:

- Deut. 18.15: 'The Lord your God will raise up a prophet from among you like myself and you will listen to him.'
- John 14.16: 'I shall send you a counsellor...' (Christians are thought to have changed the Greek text to parakletos (counsellor) from periklutos, meaning 'one worthy of praise' - ahmad in Arabic and the root of the name Muhammad)).

In all the Qur'an does not give full details of Jesus' life because his is only a precursory role and he is only a prophet.

Developing Understanding of Jesus

Jesus was said to have a future role as the eschatological prophet. It is claimed by some that Muhammad said that Jesus would return as a just judge, but there is no consensus of opinion with regard to this role. Some believe that Jesus still remains active in heaven and will return as judge, but others believe that this undermines the concept of Muhammad's being the seal of the prophets. For some Islam is the faith of finality and Jesus will lead Islam to final victory. Jesus will overcome the antichrist, witness against false messages and inaugurate millennial righteousness or the messianic era. He will fill the earth with peace and establish justice. Such an era will continue for an unknown time during which there will be no hatred, jealousy, grudges or the need for money. Earth will enjoy peace to the extent that lions will pasture with camels and tigers with oxen, wolves with sheep and so on (cf. Isaiah 2.2-4). The notion of Jesus' eschatological prophethood has been consistently rejected by many Sunni Muslims. In 1942 the Rector of Al-Azhar University in Cairo indicated that there was nothing in either the Qur'an or the Hadith which authorizes the belief that Jesus was taken up into heaven and would descend in the latter days.

Further themes evolved:

- Jesus as an ascetic prophet who called people to lead ascetic lives, who walked barefoot, had no house, no adornment or goods or excessive clothes. He submitted to God and encouraged others to live frugally
- Muhammad is the prophet, Jesus is a prophet. He is one amongst many who are sent by God and holds no special position. Messiah is simply a title. Even performing miracles does not make him unique, he is not the only prophet to do so (7.107-109; 20.65-70) That said, one has to recognise that he does so through God's power (4.49; 5.110), but these miracles are simply signs for people to believe. Jesus may have made birds out of clay or raised

people from the dead but Moses miraculously led the people out of Egypt. The greatest of all miracles, claim Muslims, is the advent of the Qur'an – it is the mightiest of all 'signs'.

- Jesus, a prophet of Israel. Jesus is seen as one whose mission is to the Jews. He is the anointed one – the Messiah – but the Jews rejected him. He is said to have encouraged the Jews to free themselves from the influence of the Scribes and Pharisees, to eradicate prevailing evils and to enter into a new relationship as brothers and sisters.
- Whilst Jesus is seen as the 'prophet of Israel', Muhammad as the 'seal of the prophets' is considered the universal prophet. The Qur'an is seen as repossessing Jesus, bringing him back from Europe. St Paul is described as a 'Christianist' who has corrupted the lofty ethics of Jesus (Isma'il Ragi A. al-Fauqi: Christian Ethics: A Historical and Systematic Analysis of Its dominant Ideas. The Hague, Djambatan, 1967)
- Jesus as a Universal Prophet. Jesus is seen (by Fathi Uthman: Ma'al-Masih fi-l Anajil al Arab'ah) as a prophet who has universal significance. The four Gospels, he says, are sure and the closest source for knowledge of Jesus who is seen as a reformer of Judaism because the ethical principles of the Torah had been reduced to formal legalism. Jesus' message is not time-bound nor superseded, therefore, the ethics of the Gospels are equally valid for both Christians and Muslims
- Involved in Spiritual Warfare: In 'Abqariyyat al Masih (The Genius of Christ) 'Abba al-Aqqad (d.1964) suggests that Jesus is a prophet/teacher in context whose message meets the socio-political character of his day. But, although he encountered powerful opposition, he was loyal and obedient to his mission. Jesus had an inner struggle with his soul and was enabled to understand the meaning of suffering and despair. He is portrayed as one of the prophets 'for whom spiritual warfare knew no truce', a prime example being the Temptations.
- Jesus' achievement is only 'spiritual'. His prophethood lacked the 'historical realism' of Muhammad. The Sermon on the Mount is viewed as 'a vision of absolute values ... a dream passionate and divine.' The historical realism of Muhammad presents, in Muslim eyes, a more balanced view of life. Jesus' humility, docility and meekness do not match Muhammad's 'evident success'.
- Jesus as a complementary prophet. In his book Mi'an 'ala-l-Tariq: Muhammad wa-l-Masih, (On the road together, Muhammad and Christ, c. 1958), Khalid Md Khalid suggests that Jesus and Muhammad were complementary prophets. The author goes beyond the Qur'anic understanding of Jesus' prophethood and draws insights from the Hadith describing the brotherhood of prophets. He also quotes from the passion narratives and recognises the significance of Jesus' sufferings.

Now I must respond to what I have found.

One of my last PhD students was a Pakistani Sufi Sheikh who became my brother. He's moved to Australia and I miss him. We happily thrashed through theological ideas, we disagreed, drank more tea, argued some more and arranged times for our families to eat together. That's my previous context, so if you find what I have to say provocative, forgive me, no offence is meant, the pursuit for each other's truths is never easy, but I believe that in the search we find the presence of God, and so I ask God's blessing now.

Let's get out of the way that about which we will not agree.

First is the humanity and divinity of Christ. That is the traditional Christian stance. The former you firmly affirm, the latter, you would reject and I understand the theological reasoning behind that. For me I cannot talk in terms of 'Jesus was God', that is a complete non-starter, but our NT speaks in terms of 'God was in Christ'. We acknowledge God as a revealing God. Perhaps you would want to say that he reveals his will, we would want to say that he reveals himself, and that to do so he must do it through that human-being called Jesus, in whom is to be found the Spirit of God. But that same spirit is not confined to Jesus Christ only but is within all humanity. That does not make us divine, but it does make us guided and empowered by the divine, so we dare to talk of a personal relationship not just with God, but in God.

A second matter of disagreement is with regard to the Crucifixion. Again I understand the reasoning behind this. (Context: movement from interdependence to independence of *jahiliyya*) Like you I have my disagreement with some Christian understanding of the crucifixion, but for me there are a number of issues I affirm.

1. Jesus talked in terms of dying to self and I believe the Cross is a prime example for humanity's lifestyle, where self-giving living for the sake of others would so change the nature of our world that it would become something of the place God wants it to be.
2. The Resurrection for us shows the defeat of the power of evil by the taking on of vulnerability, one may think that powerful domination and battles won secures victory, but what justice is there in that? Ask anyone where peace is imposed by force, it causes resentment and potential violence and a cycle of destruction. Would that the Christian right in America understood that!
3. For us, with the Crucifixion goes a renewal of a good relationship with God which we call Atonement. For the Christian, this is a gift of God's grace through the death of Jesus. How this works is the subject of much debate between Christians, and suffice to say, for some people I am regarded as a heretic. I will say little, save to say that I believe that the restoration of good relationships with God is thanks to his grace and brings about a sense of freedom from the evils of self-doubt and self-centredness and a consequent sense of self-fulfilment.

But let us move on. What do I value as a result of my dialogue with Muslim colleagues?

1. You have made me reconsider my understanding of the Trinity. I have not rejected it, but I speak in terms of the divine presence within the figure of Jesus Christ. I cannot say Jesus was God, and you have enabled me to recognise that Jesus always called himself the 'Son of Man', thus making direct claim to his humanity.
2. Khalid Md Khalid wrote in terms of 'Christ, the champion of human dignity'. Here is a practical, life-affirming aspect of faith. It is prophetic, as in the work of all those remarkable 8th century Hebrew prophets, for whom we pray God's blessing. They were the defenders of the poor, the demanders of justice, the men of integrity who sought that same integrity from the rulers of the day. Christ's followers were drawn from the *ochlos* (Greek for the ordinary folk, the peasants). They flocked to him in their thousands. This insight of Khalid is vital in both our understanding of Jesus and our own march together for justice, peace and integrity.
3. Abbas Mahmud al Aqqad wrote a book entitled 'Abqariyyat al Masih, The Genius of the Messiah'. I draw from this two matters. He writes of Jesus not only speaking about the *law of love*, but of living it. He speaks of Jesus confronting legalism and hypocrisy and of transforming the motivations for our actions. Why do I not steal from or kill my neighbour? Is it because there are laws which tell me that I should not do so, or is it because, as al Aqqad points out, our care, concern and love for neighbour so motivate me against any evil that I would not even dream of such actions – I don't even need to be told they're wrong.
4. Similarly, he writes of Jesus's encouragement towards freedom of conscience, that is the ability to distinguish between the good and the despicable. This allows the human-being to be fully him or her-self, not simply an automaton slavishly and without thought following a programmed life-span. There is a German phrase *Sei was du bist*, Be what you are. This is about the freedom to be authentically 'you'. For the Christian this is to live, as we say, 'in Christ'. That is empowered and imbued with the spirit of Christ. Is it that you Muslim colleagues talk in terms of walking *with* the Prophet, whereas we talk in terms of living *in* Christ?

But let me finish on this note:

I do not believe that it helps to talk in terms of which of the Prophets is the greatest, Moses, Jesus or Muhammad (pbuh) I think that each of them pointed beyond himself. Jesus talked in terms of the 'Kingdom of God' and Muhammad (pbuh) talked in terms of *dar ul-Islam*. But what have we, their followers, done over the centuries? I believe that we have domesticated the product. We've reduced it to our understanding, but these men had a greater vision. We have politicised both terms, made them into geographic entities, when in fact, they are beyond such limitations. Is it not our duty together to regain the vision these men gave us, searching for justice, peace, the integrity of creation and a life-style that is only possible through that infinite being that we finite human-beings can never fully understand who is the only God?