

Introduction

In the Name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful

“I am a hole in a flute by which blows the breath of Christ, listen to this music.”

Hafiz, the Persian Poet

Today we increasingly read that Christianity and Islam ‘share’ Jesus – that he belongs to both religions. More than ever before, the notion of the ‘Abrahamic civilization’ where once people spoke of ‘Judeo-Christian civilization’ includes Islam too. The Qur’an refers to Prophet Abraham as a monotheist [see Ale ‘Imran (3), Verse 67]. According to the Qur’an, [Al-An’am (6), Verses 85–87] the other prophets sent to mankind, in addition to Prophet Ibrahim (Abraham) include (but are not limited to): Ishaq (Isaac), Ya’qub (Jacob), Nuh (Noah), Dawud (David), Sulaiman (Solomon), Ayyub (Job), Yusuf (Joseph), Musa (Moses), Harun (Aaron), Zakariyya (Zachariah), Ilyas, Isma’il (Ishmael), Al-Yash’a (Elisha), Yunus (Jonah), Lut (Lot), and ‘Isa (Jesus) – God’s blessings be upon all of them.

The notion of one God, sharing prominent prophets, and the belief in the afterlife are common between Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. The similarities between Islamic and Christian thinking about Jesus are equally important: both accept the virgin birth and among the numerous miracles attributed to Jesus in the Glorious Qur’an are the revival of the dead and the creation of a bird from clay.

There are two main sources in Islam for knowing Jesus. The Qur’an gives us a history of his life, while the hadith (the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad (blessings of Allah be upon him and his family) and his Divinely appointed successors) collections establish his revered place in the Muslim understanding. As with previous prophets, Jesus’s revelation verified previous prophets’ revelations [see Ale ‘Imran (3), Verses 49 and 84; Al-Ma’idah (5), Verse 46; As-Saff (61), Verse 6]. Furthermore, Prophet Muhammad (blessings of Allah be upon him and his family) also verified the previous revelations, including the revelation to Jesus (see An-Nisa’ (4), Verse 47), such that Muslims also believe in the revelation which Jesus received (Al-Baqarah (2), Verse 136).

Given the commonality of the scriptures and the fact that Muslims and Christians have shared history of some 1,400 years, having lived side by side, one would have thought that they might know each other better. Unfortunately much of that 1,400-year history has been marked by mutual hostility. Whilst there have been periods of mutual respect and peace, the Muslim-Christian relationship has gone through major phases of conflict (the Crusades, colonization and the decline of Muslim civilization). The current phase that began with the tragedy of 9/11, has been a period of searching for real understanding, however, it has been marked by ignorance and stereotyping.

The way forward between the faiths is to begin the process of understanding each other. At this critical point in history where information technology has shrunk the boundaries of the global village even further, creating friendships and beginning the process of the rediscovery of the meaning of one's faith through dialogue is more important than ever.

One must, however, make the distinction that inter-religious dialogues are not like other dialogues. For example, negotiations between nations, bargaining between labor and management, or any attempt to find middle ground between disputing parties are common forms of dialogue which involve compromise. Compromise often makes a society run better. Labor and management have to compromise or factories don't operate. However, when people of faith have dialogue, they are not attempting any compromise.

The primary objective of inter-religious dialogue is not to build one faith for the whole planet, but to share and learn from one another. Inter-religious dialogue can be a process of spiritual growth that can have a transforming effect on those engaged in it, especially when such exchanges are done in the spirit of seeking clarity with humility, kindness, patience, generosity, and trust with a genuine desire to grow in our understanding of the greatness, abundance and mercy of God.

Dr. David Thomas of Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham, UK who often speaks of the past relations as being "...something of a nightmare, which encumbers Christians and Muslims today with a heavy baggage of memories of war, oppression and conquests" advocates that we go beyond "... the baggage to try to see each other as the other is." He goes even further and states, "...we try to take off our shoes and walk on the holy ground of the other faith ... in order to come back to our own faith as bigger ... more enriched people ready for the encounter to which God calls us."

In the glorious Qur'an, Jesus is described thus: "O Mary! Verily Allah gives you the glad tidings of a Word from Him; his name is the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, prominent in this world and in the Hereafter of those near [to God]." (Suratul Ale 'Imran (3), Verse 44) It is in this light that we present this selection of narrations of Prophet Jesus.

The collection in this publication is essentially concerned with ethics and morals. These are as much Christian morals as they are Islamic morals. In this day and age of relative morality, the concepts of right and wrong have been muddled by the modern understanding of ethics. The simple yet sublime words of Jesus provide a refreshing insight into unchanging moral values and ethics for all times and for all faiths.

We hope that this publication which offers some reflections on the 'Muslim Jesus' will further enhance understanding between the two great faiths and their inter-religious dialogue. With the portrait of Jesus presented in the Islamic sources, we demonstrate the reverence Muslims have for Jesus and hope that it will inspire better relations between Muslims and Christians.

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