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A Christmas Gift from Muslim to Christian

While at an invitation dinner I met a man who invited me to come to a certain Islamic center to give a lecture on what Muslims have to offer Christians. The event took place just before the Christian holidays, and he hoped that I might make an effort to find common ground. As I thought about the abundance of the Christmas season, I began to smile. I thought that I did well to separate myself from a practice that I could not rightly afford! At the same time I remembered a text in the holy Qur'an that used at the beginning and end these two key words, abundance and bounties. I thought that if anything in the Qur'an referred to Christmas, it must be Qur'an Chapter 102, called Takathur.

"Abundance diverts you," **(*102:1*).**

"until you come to the graves". **(*102:2*).**

"Nay! you shall soon know." **(*102:3*).**

"Nay! Nay! You shall soon know". **(*102:4*).**

"Nay! If you had known with a certain knowledge," **(*102:5*).**

"You should most certainly have seen hell;" **(*102:6*).**

"then you shall most certainly see it with the eye of certainty;" **(*102:7*).**

"then on that day you shall most certainly be questioned about the bounties." **(*102:8*).**

Considering that even Christians realize that Jesus, peace on him, was not born on the 25th of December, why should Muslims show any regard for the day? The answer is that they should not. They may, however, have regard for their neighbors who observe the day. In times when many Christians consider terrorism to be the fundamental feature of Islam, Christmas provides an opportunity for Muslims to demonstrate to their Christian neighbours that Islam, in its very essence, is a faith of peace and good will, and that this is not limited to any particular day. That is a value shared by Muslim and Christian alike.

At the same time, Muslims are justifiably famous for their hospitality. No matter how poor, a Muslim will do all in his power to entertain his guest with the best that he is able to acquire. The invited guest does not leave the Muslim household without tasting both food and drink. Furthermore, a Muslim is offended if anything is offered in return, as though by his hospitality he had laid an obligation on his guest. Considering the zest with which a Muslim provides hospitality, what more can he give the Christian as a Christmas gift?

The text from Suratut Takathur states that in the Day of Judgement we shall be held accountable for the bounties, the na'im. What are the bounties, these greatest of divine gifts, for which we are accountable.

It is reported that the eighth Holy Imam Ali ibn Musa ar-Ridha (as) has said that "a man does not like burdening anyone with any obligation about what is gifted to him. How could God ask for anything He has Himself granted out of His grace? But what God will ask man to account for is about the belief in Him and the belief in the truthfulness of the Holy Prophet and the Ahlul-Bait." The Holy Qur'an trans. With notes by S. V. Mir Ahmed Ali, Tahrike Tarsile, Elmhurst, New York, page 1900. In a longer narrative the sixth Holy Imam Ja'fer as-Sadiq (as) poses a series of questions to Abu Hanifa in which he makes the same point. We are not brought to account for matters of food and drink, but on the matter of the unity of God or at-Tawhid, an-Nubuwwat, and the Imamate.

We are fortunate in having the Imamic commentary on this otherwise obscure passage of the Holy Qur'an. I fear that many of us might fall into the same trap as Abu Hanifa in his discussion with the holy Imam, and consider that the divine blessings about which we shall be held to account on the day of Judgement are the blessings of food and drink, health, wealth and well-being. The Imams teach us, however, that the bounties, the na'im of this text, are the knowledge of the one true God, His prophets, and divine guidance. What better gift can a Muslim give to a Christian than the bounties God Himself has chosen to bestow on humankind, the gifts of greatest value, the bounties for which we are to be held in account?

In offering these bounties, the most important of divine gifts, to our Christian neighbours, we are offering better things that food and drink, finer things than hospitality. Furthermore, we are offering not only divine gifts, far better than any we could provide ourselves, but we are only offering the Christians something of their own. Both Christian and Muslim might be surprised by such a statement. But the fact is that these three bounties are the subjects most extensively and most deeply dealt with in Christian Scripture. Indeed, many Christians may not realize this amazing fact.

Some years ago I was interim pastor in a church in Erie, Pennsylvania. At a prayer meeting I was scandalized to hear a woman pray for a brand new pink Cadillac. Upon further reflection, I began to realize that perhaps her petition was more sincere than my prayers for spiritual blessings. I cannot doubt that she was praying from the heart, and that if she had received a new pink Cadillac, she would have been overjoyed. My sincerity and joy in learning to love my enemy according to my Christian duty, for example, might very well be questioned. One should be overjoyed with the bounties that Allah has given.

The bounties were once the possession of Christians, who lost them many centuries ago. What joy it must be, then, to be given these bounties as a free gift, and find that one's most valuable possessions, long lost, had been returned.

So there are several reasons why these are the gifts that Muslims should give to Christians. The first reason is that the bounties belonged to the Christians centuries ago and were lost. Muslims are responsible for returning lost property. The second reason is that we are accountable for the three bounties on the Day of Judgement, and not for food and drink. Muslims who are so hospitable with food and drink, for which they are not accountable on the Day of Judgement, should have a care about those more important things for which they will be held accountable. Thirdly, the bounties are better gifts than a pink Cadillac.

The first of the bounties is the proclamation of Tawhid or the unicity of God. It is the central theme of the holy Qur'an in such passages as Suratu Aali-'Imran:

"God! There is no God but He, the Ever Living, the Self-Subsistent." **(*3:2*).**

In the very next ayat it mentions that the one true God also sent the Torah and the Gospel, that is, the Christian Scriptures. Despite the fact that Christians had largely lost this first of all bounties before the coming of the holy Qur'an, this bounty is still to be found in their Scriptures.

Exodus 20:1-3: "And God spake all these words, saying, I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt have no other gods before me."

Deuteronomy 4:35. "Unto thee it was shewed, that thou mightest know that the Lord he is God; there is none else beside him.

Deuteronomy 32:39*. "See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god with me."

Nehemiah 9:6. "Thou, even thou, art Lord alone; thou hast made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth, and all things that are therein, the seas, and all that is therein, and thou preservest them all; and the host of heaven worshippeth thee."

Psalm 86:10. "For thou art great, and doest wondrous things: thou art God alone."

Isaiah 44:6,8*. "Thus saith the Lord the King of Israel, and his re deemer the Lord of Hosts; I am the first, and I am the last; and beside me there is no God.... Fear ye not, neither be afraid: have not I told thee from that time, and have declared it? ye are even my witnesses. Is there a God beside me? yea, there is no God; I know not any."

Isaiah 45:5,21,22*. "I am the Lord, and there is none else, there is no God beside me: I girded thee, though thou hast not known me:... Tell ye, and bring them near; yea, let them take counsel together: who hath declared this from ancient time? who hath told it from that time? have not I the Lord? and there

is no God else beside me; a just God and a Saviour; there is none beside me. Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else."

1 Corinthians 8:6. "But to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things."
The second of the bounties is the prophetship.

"O people! Indeed the Apostle **(*Muhammad*)** ***has come to you with truth from your Lord; Believe! It is good for you; and if you disbelieve, then to God is whatever is in the heavens and the earth; and God is All-Knowing, All-Wise."*** **(*4:170*)**

Prophethood in general is recognized by Christians. Even Jesus (as) is called a prophet in Luke 24:19 "And he said unto them, What things? And they said unto him, Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, which was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people"

Hosea 12:10*. "I have also spoken by the prophets, and I have multiplied visions, and used similitudes, by the ministry of the prophets."

Amos 3:7. "Surely the Lord will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets."

Acts 3:21-23. "Whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began. For Moses truly said unto the fathers, A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear in all things whatsoever he shall say unto you. And it shall come to pass, that every soul, which will not hear that prophet, shall be destroyed from among the people."

James 5:10. "Take, my brethren, the prophets, who have spoken in the name of the Lord, for an example of suffering affliction, and of patience."

But the prophetship of Muhammad (as) is also clearly announced in many earlier Scriptures. These can be a basis for giving the bounty to Christians and Jews as well. The best-known of these is Deuteronomy 18:18 "I will raise up a prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee, and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him."

Psalm 106:24 "Indeed they despise the land of Muhammad (Hebrew Hamda), they do not believe his word."

Haggai 2:7,9.7 "And I will shake all nations, and the desired one (Muhammad, Hebrew Hamda) of all nations shall come: and I will fill this house with glory, saith the LORD of hosts. 9 The glory of this latter house shall be greater than of the former, saith the LORD of hosts: and in this place will I give peace (Islam), saith the LORD of hosts."

Song of Solomon 5:16 "His mouth is most sweet: yea, he is altogether lovely (Hebrew: Mahamadim). This is my beloved, and this is my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem."

The other texts, a dozen or so, are a bit more difficult to present, as they require detailed explanation. The same is true of the reference to the Paraclete in the Gospel of John.

John 16:7–14. "Nevertheless I tell you the truth; it is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter (Paraclete, a Greek misreading of the Syriac source, which will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you. And when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: Of sin, because they believe not on me; Of righteousness, because I go to my Father, and ye see me no more; Of judgment, because the prince of this world is judged. I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come. He shall glorify me: for he shall receive of mine, and shall shew it unto you."

The third bounty is the Imamate. It is also clearly announced in the Christian Scriptures. "Philip ran thither to him, and heard him read the prophet Esaias, and said, Understandest thou what thou readest? And he said, How can I, except some man should guide me?" Acts 8:30,31. In this text a man is reading the book of the prophet, and Philip asks him if he understands what he is reading. He says “How is it possible to understand, unless some man should guide me?” In this he shows how clearly every human being in actual fact understands the necessity of the Imamate in his or her own experience. It is a need conditioned by the essential psychological character of the human being. It is only denied for reasons of ulterior motives.

The name Ali is likewise mentioned in the Bible. Exodus 8:(5)9. “And Moses said unto Pharaoh, Glory Ali: when shall I intreat for thee, and for thy servants, and for thy people, to destroy the frogs from thee and thy houses, that they may remain in the river only?”

Numbers 21:17 “Then Israel sang this song, Ali is a well (of water); sing ye unto it.”

Numbers 24:6. “Ali is like the valleys that spread forth, like gardens, a river: as the trees of lign aloes which the LORD hath planted, and as cedar trees beside the waters.”

Let us note the process whereby Muslims generally present the Imamate. There are two sources, the Qur’an and ahadith. These are presented logically, appealing to reason as the basic argument. Yet generally speaking these arguments do not prevail. It is easy to say that Allah guides whom He will. However, that does not relieve one of the responsibility of presenting one’s case in the best possible manner.

At-tawhid (the oneness of God) and an-nubuwwa (prophethood) can be easily proven both from the Qur’an and the former Scriptures merely by presenting the texts. A reasoned approach appears sufficient with these matters without in-depth reference to the context. The matter of the Imamate is different. It is poorly presented in a proof-text manner. It is necessary to dig into the context of the verses. This is not because the Imamate is less clearly evident in Scripture, but because of the character

of the Imamate itself. It is revelation in flesh and blood, rather than words. This characteristic makes it less susceptible to verbal evidencing. Context is required.

The process of presenting Imamate leads to a reevaluation of presentation altogether. Observance of our Christian neighbours will soon show us that a great deal depends on the wrapping. A gift is not really a Christmas gift unless it is wrapped properly. The Imamate often comes to the unbeliever without wrapping. Interestingly enough, the Imamate is experienced by the believer wrapping and all. Those who believe in the Imams experience that belief in terms of strong emotional experience. The believer more often focuses on his attachment and love for the Imams than he does on the rational arguments for accepting their authority. This leads one to wonder if a more emotional approach, adding the wrapping as it were, might be more effective.

Recent research on conversion indicates the important role of attachment. Attachment theory suggests that religious conversion takes place most readily in the individual who has not formed the proper childhood attachments at an early age, or has been traumatized by later events. Such individuals have a psychological need to reestablish normal human attachments. This realization has governed modern Christian approaches to evangelism. There is an effort to seek out individuals who are vulnerable or susceptible to the reestablishment of attachment, and take advantage of this by creating such attachments between the target individual and one or more religious authorities. The individual is thus drawn into the society of the church and kept there through the psychological, emotional attachment.

Observation of conversions to Islam suggests that a similar process often takes place. An individual with attachment problems may embrace Islam through having formed emotional attachments. The attachment may be toward an authority figure within Islam or within an amorous relationship. When the relationship to the Islamic community is based on such attachment, and the individual has expectations of the Islamic community that are determined by the church, difficulties often develop. When emotional expectations and dependencies are not met, the individual may become disillusioned and even detach him or herself from Islam. Therefore, even from a practical point of view, without contemplating the ethical and jurisprudential aspects of the matter, such attachment is questionable.

Let us return to the Imamate and consider its potential in terms of attachment. There are two types of attachment within the Christian experience that form a basis of contemplation. The first is the type of attachment that arises from the psychological damage just noted. The second is the type of dependency attachment that Christians have in relation to the church establishment and its authorities. Both of these are fruitful areas whereby the bounties may be gift–wrapped for Christians. If these two predispositions can be focused on the Imamate, they form a stable foundation that is able to persist even in the face of disappointment and disillusionment. It must at the same time be pointed out that even clearly secular persons often have one or both of these psychological conditions. The Muslim gift must find a way to transfer these feelings to the Imamate.

Furthermore, Christians are attached to Jesus (as) and sometimes Mary (ra) and other figures in ways

that are reminiscent of Muslim attachment to the twelve Holy Imams and to Fatima (as). This emotional attachment is perfectly appropriate within the Islamic context. Islam does not seek to destroy the emotional experience of Christianity, but to broaden it. In this area Shi'ites in their relationship to people of Christian origin have an advantage.

At this point we have seen that there is a contrasting continuum between at-tawhid and al-imamah. At-tawhid is highly susceptible to textual proofing, logical analysis, and rational argument. On the other hand, al-imamah is highly susceptible to emotional attachment. The two should be wrapped in opposite ways. I believe there is evidence that Christians are not able to open the bounty of tawhid, because the presentation, which begins in textual examination and logic, fails to go on to the emotional response that the realization of at-tawhid creates in the human soul.

In quite the opposite way, the Christian is unable to open the bounty of al-imamah, because the emotional attachment, loyalty, and love of the believer for the Imams is not presented first. The one giving the gift too quickly passes over into the area of proof and logic. Thus, in presenting at-tawheed, we should begin with Scriptural and logical arguments and proceed to love and attachment. By contrast, with al-imamah, we should begin with loyalty, love and attachment to the Imams, and proceed from there to Scriptural and logical arguments.

These conclusions are reached through a process of anthropological observation and open interviews on one hand, and a deductive analysis on the other. It remains for the reader to evaluate the concepts and try them in practice. I hope that these cogitations might provide gifts of bounties that Muslims may present to their Christian neighbours not only on Christmas but throughout the year.

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