

The Christ of the Quran

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The orthodox conception of Christ in Islam has been defined in the following words by Maulvi Hafiz Muhammad Idris :

The Muslims believe that Jesus was a chosen servant (*'abd*) of God, and was a true apostle. When his enemies wanted to kill him, God sent his angel Gabriel, who lifted him up to heaven alive without any injury done to him, and he now lives in heaven. 'God took him to himself' (Quran 4:156). When the Day of Resurrection will approach, he will descend from heaven and his descent will be at the Mosque of the Muslims. Then all the Christians who believe in the Trinity will surrender themselves to him, and like the Muslims, will accept him as God's chosen servant and apostle. He will kill the anti-Christ and the Jews, so that their claim that they killed Christ the Son of Mary and hung him on the cross, may prove false before the world.¹

This is a simple and straightforward statement of the Islamic conception of Christ. It contains nothing derogatory or disrespectful of the man Jesus, and yet there is a world of difference between it and the Christian idea of the nature of Christ. The question is often asked: how can this difference be bridged over? Many have found this an impossible task, for they say the sonship of Christ can only suggest divine procreation. 'They (the Christians) say, The God of Mercy hath gotten an offspring! Now have ye done a monstrous thing! Almost might the very Heavens be rent thereat, and the mountains fall down in fragments, that they ascribe a son to the God of Mercy, when it beseemeth not the God of Mercy to beget a son!' (Surah 19:91-93); 'How when He hath no wife, can He have a son?' (Surah 6:100); 'Say; He, Allah, is One: Allah is eternal. He begets not, nor is He begotten; and none is like Him' (Surah 112).

But is this all that the Quran, that infallible book of the Muslim upon which all Islamic dogmas are rigidly based, has to say about Jesus the Son of Mary? Does it not contain any light on the mystery of the Incarnation which a Muslim reader may use for a better understanding of the nature of Christ? 'This is far from

¹ *Da'wat-i-Islam*, p. 35; Jame' Ashrafiya, Lahore (translated from Urdu).

being a proposal to find proof-texts in the Quran for Christian quotation—a most precarious and unwise proceeding. Rather it means an open-hearted effort to understand the meaning of Christianity in the light of the fullest reckoning with some of the sayings of the Quran (regarding Jesus).¹

It is an undeniable fact, which Muslim friends also accept, that there are certain sayings of the Quran which have not been treated clearly and intelligibly by Muslim commentators. The explanation for this, in many cases, is that these topics were taken over by Muhammad from other sources, irrespective of the real object of the original writers, and without understanding their intention. Even the best Muslim commentators on the Quran have experienced insurmountable difficulties in attempting to interpret these texts, largely because they were unfamiliar with the technical language of other creeds by which they can alone be explained. It may be that the Arabian Prophet honestly brought in these topics because he was struck and impressed by them, but was unable to see their real significance.

The purpose of this article is to draw out certain sayings of the Quran which a friend of the Muslims, seeking to explain a fuller idea of Christ, may use with some advantage.

1. One wonders whether the Muslim reader of the Quran understands what is involved in the Immaculate Conception of Jesus as recorded in Surah 19: 19–22: ‘He (Gabriel) said: Verily I am a messenger of the Lord to give thee a holy son. She (Mary) said: How shall I have a son, when man hath never touched me? And I am not unchaste. He said: So shall it be: Thy Lord hath said: Easy is this with me, and we will make him a sign to men and a mercy from us. For it is a thing decreed. And she conceived him.’ No other prophet has thus miraculously entered the world. It may be said that Adam was created without father or mother, but such an act was necessary at the beginning of the human race. In the case of Jesus, as the Quran itself recognizes, we see God interrupting the course of nature and overriding the laws of procreation which He had Himself established, so that Christ might have a virgin birth. Such an act could not have been without meaning. To understand its significance, we must look at it in the context of St. Luke’s Gospel, from which the idea incorporated in the Quran was no doubt taken by Muhammad: ‘Behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call His name Jesus. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Most High’ (Luke 1: 31, 32).

2. Jesus is called the Word of God in the Quran. ‘Verily, the Messiah Jesus, Son of Mary, is the Apostle of God, and His Word which He conveyed into Mary’ (Surah 6: 171). It is interesting to compare this title of Jesus with the titles given to other prophets in the Quran: Adam is called *Safi Ullah* (chosen of

¹ Kenneth Cragg: ‘The Quran and the Christian Reader’ (in *The Muslim World*, January 1957, p. 63).

God), Noah *Nabi Ullah* (prophet of God), Abraham *Khalil Ullah* (friend of God), Moses *Kalim Ullah* (speaker with God), Muhammad *Rasul Ullah* (apostle of God); but none of these titles indicate such a close relationship with God as *Kalimat Ullah* (Word of God), used of Jesus Christ. Some Muslim commentators have attempted to interpret the title as a term indicating the creation of Jesus by the 'command' of God, yet no Muslim would give the title *Kalimat Ullah* to Adam, who was created by God's command (Surah 3:52).

Moreover in the verse quoted above, it is stated that Jesus was the Word of God which 'He (God) conveyed into Mary', which indicates that the 'Word' existed before entering the womb of Mary. This title of Jesus can only be understood by a reference to the New Testament, where it is clearly stated that the Word is divine and existed with God before It became man, and by It God manifested Himself to the world. 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us' (John 1:1, 14); 'All things have been delivered unto me of my Father; and no one knoweth who the Son is, save the Father; and who the Father is, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son willeth to reveal him' (Luke 10:22).

3. Another name given to Jesus in the Quran is *Ruh Ullah* (the Spirit of God). 'Verily the Messiah Jesus, Son of Mary, is the Apostle of God and His word which He conveyed into Mary, and a spirit (proceeding) from Him' (Surah 4:171). This name has again perplexed Muslim divines. To avoid the inference of the text, it is often said that if the term Spirit of God as applied to Jesus suggests His divinity, then we must likewise admit that according to the Quran Adam and other prophets are also divine; for the Quran says: 'God said to the angels concerning Adam, when I shall have completely formed him and shall have breathed my Spirit into him, do ye fall down and worship him' (Surah 15:29). It is difficult to see how this verse could suggest that Adam was divine since it does not speak of Adam as being the Spirit of God, but as one into whom God breathed His Spirit, just as divinity cannot be ascribed to Mary of whom the Quran says: 'And remember her (Mary) who preserved her virginity and into whom we breathed of our spirit' (Surah 21:91).

It is interesting to note that some Muslim commentators recognize a special quality in the term 'Spirit of God' which cannot be ascribed to a human person. Imam Razi for instance says: 'Jesus is the giver of life to the world', and one is inclined to think that Imam Razi was referring to the witness of the New Testament concerning Christ, namely: 'I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth on me, though he die, yet shall he live' (John 11:25); 'The first man Adam became a living soul. The last Adam (Christ) became a life-giving spirit' (1 Corinthians 15:45). Another commentator, Baidhani, goes a step further in his interpretation of Surah 4:171, and says: 'This verse indicates

that Jesus possessed a Spirit proceeding from God, not mediately but direct, both as to origin and essence, because he giveth life to the dead, and to the hearts of men'. A Bengali-Muslim publication, *Pacharak* of Posh 1307/1895, says: 'Jesus was not merely an earthly person; He was not born of carnal desire. He is a Spirit from heaven . . . Jesus came from the great throne of heaven, and, bringing to the world the command of God, has shown the way of salvation'.

If Jesus is called the Spirit of God in the *Quran*, and this Spirit was 'breathed into Mary' having 'proceeded' from God, it is hardly possible to use such terms of a mere human prophet. They point to the fuller teaching of the Gospels, where Jesus speaks of the glory which He shared with the Father before the world was. 'O Father, glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was' (John 17:5).

4. Yet another title given to Jesus in the *Quran* is 'Honourable in this world and in the world to come'. Muslim commentators see in this title an indication that Jesus Christ will intercede for sinners at the Last Day. Baidhani interprets the title in these words: 'The illustrious one in this world as prophet, and in the next as intercessor'. Another commentator, Zamakh Shari, in his *Al-Kashshaf* says the same: 'The office of prophet and supremacy over men in this world, and in the next world the office of intercessor, and office of rank in Paradise'. On the other hand there is not a single verse in the *Quran* where it is stated that on the Day of Judgement any other prophet will be deemed worthy of interceding for sinners. Even Muhammad himself did not claim this privilege. On one occasion some Arabs refused to go forth to war with him. It is recorded in the *Quran* that they came afterwards to him, saying: 'Ask pardon for us'. And the Prophet gave the answer: 'Who can have power over God on your behalf, whether He will give you some loss or whether He will give you an advantage?' (Surah 48:11, cf. 9:81). An interesting tradition supporting Jesus' intercessory function is quoted by Al Ghazali in his book *Precious Pearls*, where we find: 'Go to Jesus, on him be peace, for he is the truest of those who were sent as apostles, and who knew most God, and the most ascetic in life of them all, and the most eloquent of all in wisdom; perchance he will intercede for you'.

5. Lastly the *Quran* recognizes Jesus as the only prophet that was sinless. In doing so it has crowned all the honours it has bestowed upon Jesus; 'Verily I am the messenger of thy Lord to give thee a holy son' (Surah 19:19). When the Blessed Virgin Mary was born, her mother Anna said to God: 'I have named her Mary, and I take refuge with thee for her and her offspring from Satan the stoned' (Surah 3:31). Commenting on this verse Al Bukhari quotes the following tradition: 'The Prophet said, There is no son of Adam born except Mary and her son but Satan touches them when he is born, and he cries out from the touch of

Satan'. A variant form of this tradition is found in *Mishkatu'l Masabeh*: 'The Apostle of God said, Every child of Adam is at its birth struck in the side by the devil's fingers, except Jesus the Son of Mary. The devil meant to stick his fingers into his side, but stuck them in the membranes enveloping the foetus'.¹ While Muhammad's idea of the origin of sin cannot be equated with the Christian conception, the references quoted from the Quran at least indicate a recognition of what the New Testament has to say about the sinlessness of our Lord (Luke 1:35; John 8:46; 1 John 3:5; 1 Peter 2:22).

We will conclude by quoting some more words of Dr. Kenneth Cragg, words which may appropriately sum up the intention of this article²: 'When Moses, as recorded in Surah 20:10 and Surah 27:7, became aware of the fire in the bush he promptly proposed to his people that he might bring to them from it a brand or a torch by which he and they might find illumination. May it not be possible in the same manner to seek in the ruling ideas of the Quran that which may illumine both the meaning of Islam and the relevance of what Christians seek to say to Muslims?'

¹ Book I, Chapter 3, Part 1 and Book XXVI, Chapter 1, Part 1 (Matthew's translation).

² Op. cit. pp. 62, 63.

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The Christ is the meeting-place of the eternal, the universal, on the one hand; and the historical, temporal and particular, on the other. The eternal by itself would be the ever-present ground of existence, and its relation to the particular modes of being would be general in the sense that the particular modes would not really count. The emphasis is on the common ground shared by all particular manifestations. The historical, on the other hand, would be marked out by its particularity and uniqueness and would stand in complete isolation from other particulars except that the spatial continuum might create an illusion of relatedness. The emphasis of the historical and temporal side is on particularity and individuality. The emphasis is on the difference and the uniqueness. This would be isolation and divorce from relationship.

The two by principle of mutual exclusion are half-truths and therefore distortions of truth. The two in relation would constitute the most decisive category. In the Christ the two meet in the way that neither does the eternal simply use the particular and the individual as means to an end, nor does the particular shine by its own solitary splendour. The two are related in such a way that in the higher unity of the person of the Christ the two are one without contradiction.