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Moslems and Christ.

KINDLY-DISPOSED Moslems frequently venture the remark to a missionary that Christianity and Islam have much in common, adding: "The main difference is about Jesus, the Messiah (peace be upon Him!); we hold Him to be a prophet, whereas you speak of Him as the 'Son of God.' That is all."

But that is *everything*, and it would be disloyal, not to say unwise of the missionary to let a statement like that pass unchallenged. Besides, the informed Moslem knows full well that the two faiths differ in much else, so that over-ready assent on the part of the Christian would be taken as proof that he is not properly acquainted with the issues at stake.

Nevertheless, the Moslem is right—the main difference does concern the respective appraisals of Christ; it is this difference, in fact, that constitutes our chief difficulty. How much simpler the task of preaching to Moslems would be were we to cherish Unitarian views. But in that case there could, strictly speaking, be no "preaching"; for with Christ reduced to the rank of a prophet, *and with the Cross cut out*, there would be no "gospel."

Thus it is that the place given to Christ by Moslems soon arouses the keen interest of your missionary. He discovers that he has to do with a people who, while claiming to hold Jesus in high esteem, yet prefer their traditional ideas about Him, *and oppose them*, to anything the Christian may say.

Back of this intransigent attitude is, of course, the influence of the Christology of the Quran, that "scripture" to which the typical Moslem turns as a final court of appeal. And that is the pity of it; the record upon which the missionary relies, the gospel narrative to which he turns for confirmation, the one historical account of this Person which the world possesses, is, by the Moslem, brushed aside as unacceptable. Why? Well (he argues), both accounts obviously cannot be true; one of them must have been tampered with; and that, in the very nature of the case, cannot have been "the glorious Quran," for every letter of it is God's own, His latest and most perfect Word for the world.

Think what a fund of patience is required by the missionary who feels constrained to preach Christ, and a crucified Christ, to people whose mode of reasoning is like that! Yet patience alone will not suffice. He must add to it knowledge—knowledge of certain facts that lie behind the Moslems' view of Christ; only so

will he be able to see them as a misguided people, pitiable victims of an ancient blunder that goes back to the days of Muhammad. For, ultimately, it is to his understanding, or rather misunderstanding, that we must turn for an explanation of the way in which Christ is spoken of in the Quran.

They say Muhammad was illiterate; then who informed, or misinformed him on these matters? Was it some scheming Jew, or partisan Christian? Who shall say? This much seems true, that in those days of sectarian controversy in the Syrian Church no impassioned preacher of the Cross of Christ came his way, nor had the Christians yet translated the Gospel into Arabic. How then could he understand?

But to return to the question of the influence of the Quran on the attitude of Moslems to our teaching about Christ—this can readily be illustrated by a brief consideration of their reactions to three selected themes; the "Sonship" of Christ, the doctrine of the Trinity, and the historicity of the Crucifixion.

I.

I retain a vivid recollection of my embarrassment, over thirty years ago, at the retort of a Moslem in Bengal to whom I proffered a copy of one of the gospels. "No," said he, "I don't want it! God forgive you! it teaches that God *had a child*." That seems the best phrase in English to convey both the insinuation and the scorn which the man put into his words, implying that the very idea was an insult to the Divine Majesty. It left me, a youngster, speechless.

But this carnal conception of the "Sonship" is something we have always to contend with, and it is there in the Quran. Here are some well-known passages:

The Christians say: "The God of mercy hath taken to Himself a son!" Now have ye done a monstrous thing! Almost might the very heavens be rent thereat, and the earth cleave asunder, 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!

Again,

The Christians say: "The Messiah is a son of God!" Such are the sayings of their mouths. They resemble the sayings of the infidels of old! God fight them! How misguided they are!

In his reaction to the use of this term by Christians Muhammad was, without doubt, prejudiced by the idolatrous beliefs of his own townspeople at Mecca, and he castigates them also in words like these:

“In their ignorance they have falsely ascribed to Him sons and daughters. Glory be to Him! and highly let Him be exalted above that which they attribute to Him! Sole Maker of the heavens and earth, how when He hath no wife, should He have a son?”

On the other hand, it is clear from the Quran, that Muhammad believed Jesus to have been born supernaturally; yet he could only bring himself to use this term of Him in the phrase made familiar to us by the Quran, viz.: “son of Mary.” That Christians should think and speak of Christ as “Son of God” for reasons quite other than the question or manner of His *birth*, was either outside his knowledge or beyond his comprehension.

Following the lead of Muhammad and the Quran, Moslems generally feel it to be their solemn duty to pronounce against this “heresy,” as they deem it, of the Christians. Daily, during the recital of the prescribed prayers, they repeat these other words from the Quran, which Muhammad is said to have appraised as equal in value to one-third of the whole book:

Say: “He is God alone; God, the self-sufficient.
He doth not beget, and He is not begotten;
And there is none in His likeness at all.”

This passage, in Arabic, is inscribed over the niche in the rear wall of the mosque at Woking, and amounts to a proclamation of the Islamic creed of the Unity (*Tawheed*) over against the Christian doctrine of the Trinity (*Taslees*).

II.

It goes without saying that the full force of the Moslems’ protest is directed not so much against the use of this language, “Son of God,” as against the deeper implication of such “Sonship,” viz., that it places Christ within the category of Deity. We make Him, they say, another “God.” That, in fact, is the charge brought against Christians in the Quran:

“O ye People of the Book! say not of God what is untrue. The Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, is only an apostle of God. Believe, therefore, in God and His apostles, and say not ‘Trinity’—forbear, it were better for you! For God is one God.”

Again,

“They surely blaspheme who say: ‘God is the third of three’ . . . and if they refrain not, a grievous chastisement shall befall them!”

In another passage God is represented as interrogating Jesus, thus:

"O Jesus, son of Mary, hast thou said unto mankind, Take me and my mother as two gods, besides God?"

Three Gods! Yet our very creeds seem framed to confirm the Moslem in his conviction that we "blaspheme": "The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Ghost is God." Some years ago in Lahore, while seated in conversation with the late Sir Muhammad Iqbal, the celebrated philosopher and poet, I received startling evidence of this. Apropos of something I had said, he suddenly smote the head of the couch with his fist, once, twice, thrice, and asked: "You Christians surely do not believe in one, two, three Gods, do you—Father, and Son, and Holy Spirit?" *Well!* . . . I must leave the reader to imagine the kind of reply I was moved to make to this acknowledged leader among Moslems.

They press us hard at this point, but we cannot hope that they will understand so profound a mystery unless and until they first know and receive Christ as Saviour.

III.

Yet that knowledge comes to us by way of the Cross, the Cross these Moslems deny! Here, however, we are on surer ground, for though our opponents may complain that in respect of our doctrine of the Trinity we have little or no support in Scripture, the same cannot be said of the evidence in the Gospels, and the New Testament generally, for the crucifixion. But as against this the Moslem pins his faith to a curious passage in the Quran:

"And as for the saying of the Jews: 'Verily we have slain the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, an apostle of God'—yet they slew him not and they crucified him not, but they had only his likeness . . . they did not really slay him, but God took him up to Himself."

Interpretations of this passage vary, but the common opinion is that God frustrated the intention of the Jews and caused another (some say Judas Iscariot!) to look like Jesus. This one was seized and crucified, while God took up Jesus unscathed to heaven. Another version is that Jesus was actually nailed to the cross and swooned thereon, but did not die.

On one occasion I was engaged in an interesting conversation with an educated Moslem on the subject of the crucifixion. In the course of our talk, much to my surprise, he remarked that he believed that Jesus in that moment "made the supreme sacrifice." Concealing as best I could my quickening interest, I asked: "Then you do believe that Jesus gave up His life on the cross?" The expression on his face changed, and he replied haltingly: "Ah, well, you see, we Moslems believe that He did not *quite* die" (!)

And they think they do honour to the name of Jesus by maintaining their denial. They would make of the Quranic version of the act of God, the *exaltation* of Jesus, in that He was rescued from an ignominious death. How different is the Christian conception of that sublime sacrifice: "We see Jesus, *because of the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honour*" ; precisely because He humbled Himself by death upon the cross "God *highly exalted Him.*"

The Jews seek to degrade Jesus by crucifixion, the Moslems to honour Him by saving Him from it. What is this but the stumbling-block of the Cross in another form?

But the evidence on this point is all against the Moslems. Nothing is clearer in the Gospel narrative, no incident receives more detailed and convincing treatment, than this *fact* that Jesus was crucified to death under Pontius Pilate to placate the Jews.

We may with confidence leave the evidence in the hands of earnest Moslems, praying at the same time that God's Holy Spirit will open their hearts to the Truth.

L. BEVAN JONES.