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Jesus Christ Our Lord Almighty



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One of the main themes of the book of Revelation is the sovereignty and omnipotence of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is a central fact of Christianity and is much needed during our times. The triumph of Christ is confessed in the oldest Christian Creed: "And He shall come again, with glory, to judge the living and the dead, whose kingdom shall have no end" (Nicea AD 325).

Nowadays, this Christian belief is being criticized as triumphalist and exclusivist. Consider this example from the May 2003 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*. Bernard Lewis, who has taught Middle East history at both Princeton University and the University of London, contributed an article with this shocking title, "I'm Right, You're Wrong, Go to Hell: Religions and the Meeting of Civilization."

I was both chagrined and disappointed that this great scholar posited equivalence between Christianity and Islam in their respective outlooks on the world, and more specifically, as they sought, and still seek, to win converts to their specific faiths.

To begin with, Bernard Lewis reminds us in this article that "only two civilizations have been defined by religion. Others have had religions but are identified primarily by region and ethnicity." These two religions are Christianity and Islam, they "are the two religions that define civilizations, and

they have much in common, along with some differences.”

Having thus set Christianity and Islam apart from the rest of world religions such as Judaism, Buddhism, and Hinduism, Professor Lewis classified the latter three as relativist religions, and the former two as triumphalist religions.

For some religions, just as “civilization” means us, and the rest are barbarians, so “religion” means ours, and the rest are infidels. Other religions, such as Judaism and most of the religions of Asia, concede that human beings may use different religions to speak to God, as they use different languages to speak to one another. God understands them all. . . . The relativist view was condemned and rejected by both Christians and Muslims, who shared the conviction that there was only one true faith, theirs, which it was their duty to bring to all humankind. The triumphalist view is increasingly under attack in Christendom, and is disavowed by significant numbers of Christian clerics. There is little sign as yet of a parallel development in Islam.

Professor Lewis regards Islam and Christianity as triumphalist religions. Both faiths consider all “others” as infidels. While, according to him, some Christian leaders are nowadays “disavowing” the triumphalism that has marked Christianity throughout history, there is no such parallel movement among Muslim leaders. In our globalized world, triumphalism (whether Christian or Muslim) is not conducive to world peace. In order to put across his thesis in the clearest way, Lewis sums up his disapproval of triumphalism, both in Islam and in Christianity, with these words:

For those taking the triumphalist approach (classically summed up in the formula, “I’m right, you’re wrong, go to hell”), tolerance is a problem. Because the triumphalist’s is the only true and complete religion, all other religions are at best incomplete and more probably false and evil; and since he is the privileged recipient of God’s final message to humankind, it is surely his duty to bring it to others rather than keep it selfishly for himself.

The first point I would like to make is that, great as the scholarship of Bernard Lewis is, his lumping together of the “triumphalism” of the two religions is neither proper nor objective. One has to be careful in categorizing the faith of others. As a Christian, I find the title of his article very offensive. It is a caricature of Christianity to sum up its attitude to the “other” as being, “I’m right, you’re wrong, go to hell.”

Throughout history, Christians, beginning with the apostolic age, sought to win converts through preaching and witnessing. It was none other than the risen Lord that gave his church the marching orders:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I will be with you always, to the very end of the age (Matthew 28:18b–20 NIV).

The greatest missionary of the first century was the apostle Paul. After his conversion, his life was dedicated entirely to the spread of the faith and the organization of churches in the Mediterranean world. He described his mandate in the opening words of his letter to the Romans: “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile” (Romans 1:16 NIV).

Paul’s message consumed him. He was absolutely convinced that the risen Savior had entrusted him with the message that brings salvation to all kinds of people, regardless of their ethnic or religious background. As to the primary means for converting “others,” God had ordained the preaching of the gospel. In 1 Corinthians, Paul wrote, “For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe” (1:21 NIV).

In contrast with this peaceful spread of Christianity, Islam spread primarily through conquest. When studying the

history of Islam back in Syria in the late 1940s, my teachers at the Syrian College used to glory in the *Futuh* ("conquests") of the Arabs. By AD 732, one century after the death of Muhammad, Islam had conquered territories stretching from Spain in the west to India in the east. While Christians and Jews were allowed to remain in their respective religions, pagans were forced to Islamize. Furthermore, the People of the Book (as Christians and Jews were called) had to submit to some stringent rules that greatly limited their freedoms. They were designated by the Arab invaders as *Dhimmi* (an Arabic word that means "protected"). Their status is known as *Dhimmitude*. Originally, the Christians of the Middle East formed the majority population. A few centuries later, they became minorities in such areas as Syria, Palestine, and Egypt. The church disappeared in North Africa.

Professor Lewis should not have posited equivalence between Christianity and Islam as far as the method for gaining converts. As a historian, he should know better than that!

The second point in my criticism of the article of Bernard Lewis is that he fails to see the great contrast between what he calls the "triumphalism" of the two religions. Yes, Christians do believe in the ultimate triumph of the gospel. Their faith is summarized in these great words of Revelation 11:15b, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever" (NIV). And in one of the most familiar passages of this New Testament book, we hear the heavenly choir sing these triumphant words: "Hallelujah! For Lord God Almighty reigns" (19:6b NIV).

Islam, throughout its history, has been triumphalist. Notwithstanding its many setbacks, especially after the leader of modern Turkey, Kemal Ataturk, abolished the caliphate in 1924, Muslims have never ceased to believe in the final triumph of their faith. Today, the inevitable triumph of Islam remains the core belief of the radical Islamists. They do not and would not hesitate to use any means to bring about the triumph of Islam, even if that meant total confrontation with the rest of the world.

On the other hand, if Christianity is described as a triumphalist faith, its triumphalism is related to an eschatological event. While the gospel has many implications and applications for the here and now, its complete fulfillment takes place beyond the horizon of this world order. Nowhere is this made plainer than in Romans 8. In that great confession of Paul, he describes the ultimate triumph of the Christian faith:

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits with eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. . . . For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. For who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently (Romans 8:18–21, 24, 25 NIV).

Yes, I do believe in the ultimate triumph of my Christian faith. But I know that this triumph will not come because of any military campaign, or through any worldly means. The victory of Christ over the world will become visible and evident to all at his Second Coming. Paul described the triumph of Jesus Christ in these memorable words: "Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of the Father" (Philippians 2: 9–11 NIV).

Therefore, there is no equivalence between Christianity and Islam, neither in their core beliefs, nor in the way they conceive of history and its end. Much as I still appreciate the works of Bernard Lewis, I am very, very disappointed with his article because his thesis is flawed, both historically and theologically.

Author

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