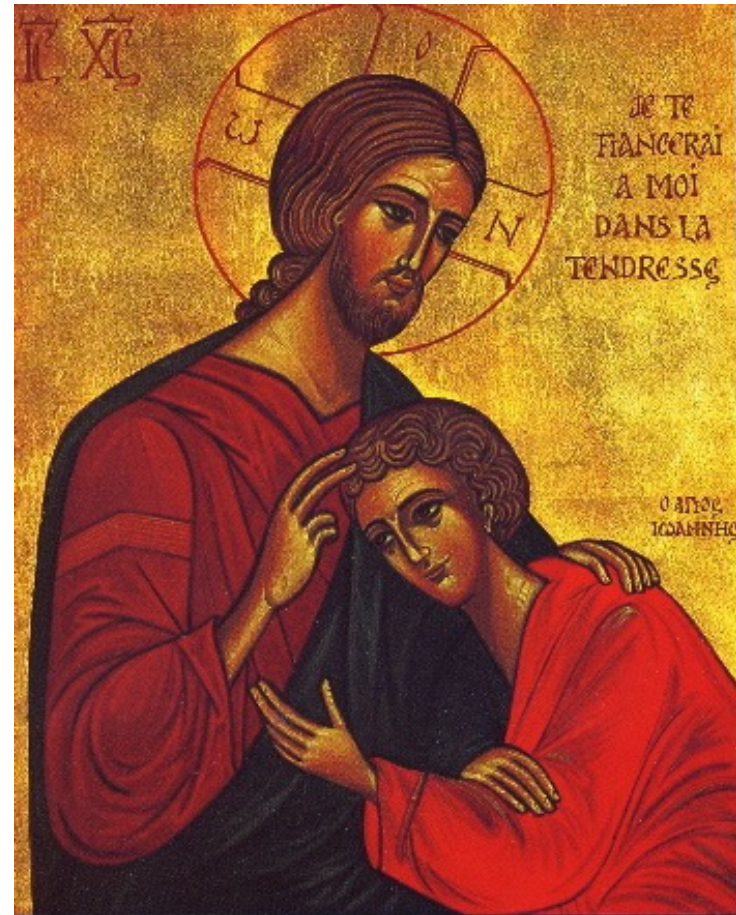


03. The Muslim Qur'an and the Christian New Testament



As noted earlier, the Quran frequently refers to stories from the Hebrew Scriptures. Reference to the Christian Scriptures is far less frequent. It refers to the story of Zechariah and John (Sûrah 19). It knows of the virgin Mary (Sûrah 19:20), and the miraculous conception of Jesus (Sûrah 3). However, only in the concluding verses of Sûrah 5 (verses 110-116) does the Quran refer to scenes from the public ministry of Jesus: the healing of the man who was born blind, the healing of the leper, the raising of the dead, and the multiplication of the loaves.

‘When Jesus, son of Mary, said: O children of Israel! Truly I am the Messenger of God to you, confirming that which came before me in the Torah, and bearing glad tidings of a Messenger to come after me, whose name is ’Ahmad (‘more praiseworthy’, Sûrah 61:6).

Jesus did see himself as a messenger from God, and as fulfilling the Torah: ‘Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill’ (Matthew 5:17). He also spoke of the coming of ‘the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name’ (John 14:26). He did not speak of the Spirit as ’Ahmad, a name which enables some Moslems to identify the Spirit with Muhammad.

'God sent His Messenger with guidance and the Religion of Truth to make it prevail over all religion' (Sûrah 61:9; see 9:33; 48:28).

'Religion of Truth' is understood as the religion of Abraham, revealed to Moses, Jesus, and culminating in Muhammad.

Muslims honour Jesus as a significant prophet of God, but criticise Christians as *'disbelievers'* because they failed to recognise Muhammad as the *'Seal of the prophets'* (Sûrah 33:40).

1. The first and most basic 'pillar' of Islam (Shahâda) is profession of faith in the One God and in Muhammad as his prophet.

The other four pillars of Islam flow from the first:

2. the requirement of ritual prayer (Salât);

3. of almsgiving (Zakât);

4. of fasting (Sawm, in Ramadân);

5. of making a pilgrimage to Mecca (Hajj) once in a lifetime.

These all feature in Sûrah 2, and in other sûrahs.

In almost every sūrah, Muhammad speaks of the awesome God, the Creator of everything. In his day the pagan tribes of Arabia were polytheistic. That there is only one God is basic to the teaching of Muhammad, as it is to Judaism and Christianity.

‘God has prescribed for you as religion that which He enjoined upon Noah, and that which We revealed unto thee [Muhammad], and that which We enjoined upon Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, that you uphold religion and not become divided therein. Grievous for the idolaters is that which you call them. God chooses for Himself whomsoever He will, and guides unto Himself whosoever turns in repentance’ (Sūrah 42:13, from Mecca).

‘Say, He, God, is One! God, the Eternally Sufficient unto Himself. He begets not, nor was He begotten. And none is like to Him!’ (Sūrah 122, from ?)

Muhammad found full agreement about monotheism in the Scriptures of the Jews.

However, to be truly monotheistic we cannot say that there is only one God, and that this God is ours alone. If there is only one God then everything and everybody has the one Source of its being; everything must be inter-connected. A true monotheist must see everyone as fundamentally and inherently sacred, however badly people may be behaving. People we consider our enemies are not God's enemies. Jesus makes this abundantly clear, and it flows from his understanding of God (see Matthew 5:43-48).

We have learned, too, to see God as loving, not controlling, creation. God is constantly loving, constantly inspiring, constantly offering forgiveness, so that people will live to the full and help others to live to the full. When terrible things happen we do not ask why God allowed it, for we take seriously the freedom of our evolving universe, and God's gift to us of our own human freedom, even to act badly. We ask, rather, where is God in what is happening. And our answer is: where there is love, there is God.

We human beings experience, in however limited a way, freedom to choose to do good or to choose to do evil. God respects this freedom. From it flows much that we experience as evil, but from it flows everything of value. Every created being is a limited, imperfect, but real expression of the Self-giving God. Everything is fundamentally sacred, and so to be respected.

Christians also insist on monotheism. It is important that we express our faith clearly, for the Christian teaching on Jesus as the Son of God and Mary as the mother of God seemed to Muhammad (and continue to seem to many Muslims) to compromise the transcendence of the one God. It is important that we examine carefully the language we Christians use to speak of the relationship between Jesus and God, whom he addressed as 'Father'.

According to the Christian Scriptures, when those who knew and came to love Jesus heard him speak and witnessed his healing love they came to see that his words and actions flowed from the special intimacy he had with God. They recognised in Jesus something of their own yearning, something of their own consciousness of the presence to them of God. Jesus' words and actions were the words and actions of Jesus, and they had a special power to reveal God. When the authors of the Gospels shared this in their writings, they were sharing memories, but also reflections on Jesus and the meaning Jesus gave to their lives. The fact that the community of Jesus' disciples treasured and copied and shared their words points to the Gospels as being inspired, but the words are the words of the Gospel writers, and cannot be understood without grasping the meaning their words had some thirty to sixty years after the death of Jesus.

The Gospel of John witnesses to the fact that misunderstanding the nature of the relationship between Jesus and God was already a factor in the debates of the last decade of the first century when the Gospel was composed. It is evident that Jews who did not accept Jesus as the promised Messiah (this group is called 'the Jews' throughout the Gospel) were debating with the Jews who accepted Jesus as the Messiah. The debate was about how Jesus' followers understood the relationship between Jesus and God.

In John chapter 5 we find an account of Jesus' healing a man. Because the healing took place on the Sabbath: 'The Jews started persecuting Jesus, because he was doing such things on the Sabbath' (John 5:16).

We are then given Jesus' response: 'My Father is still working, and I also am working' (John 5:17).

The text continues: 'For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the Sabbath, but was also *calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God*' (John 5:18).

That this is not how John understood Jesus' claim is clear from Jesus' response:

'Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise. The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing' (John 5:19-20).

It was from his intimate communion with God that Jesus experienced the call and the grace to share with others the revelation that he received from God: 'My teaching is not mine but his who sent me' (John 7:16-17).

'I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me. And the one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him' (John 8:28-29).

‘I declare to the world what I have heard from him’ (John 8:26).

‘I declare what I have seen in the Father’s presence’(John 8:38).

‘The word that you hear is not mine. It is from the Father who sent me’ (John 14:24).

If we leave out the word ‘Father’, Muslims could use similar words in speaking of Muhammad and the Quran.

My aim in quoting from John’s Gospel is to state that neither Jesus nor his followers thought of Jesus as another God. On the contrary, Jesus acknowledged that everything he is comes from God, including the words and deeds that flowed from his communion with the One who alone is God.

‘Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work’ (John 4:34).

‘I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me’ (John 5:30).

‘The deeds that the Father has given me to complete, the very deeds that I am doing, testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me’ (John 5:36).

‘I do nothing on my own. The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him’ (John 8:28-29).

‘It is the Father living in me who is doing this work’ (John 14:10).

‘Jesus cried aloud: “Whoever believes in me believes not in me but in him who sent me. And whoever sees me sees him who sent me” (John 12:44-45).

Jesus' disciples came to see him as the perfect human expression (the 'incarnation') of God. The Gospel of John expresses this well in the Prologue. After stating that the whole of creation is an expression of God's Self-giving Word, John tells us that God's eternal Word found perfect human expression in Jesus: 'The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth ... From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace ... No one has ever seen God. It is the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, who has made God known' (John 1:14-18).

When we speak of Jesus' divinity, we are speaking of his intimate communion with God. Everything he is, everything he says, everything he does, flows from this communion. Such was the intimacy of this communion that Jesus could say: 'The Father and I are one' (John 10:30). Here again 'the Jews' misunderstood his claim.

‘The Jews took up stones again to stone him. Jesus replied, “I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these are you going to stone me?” The Jews answered, “It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you, but for blasphemy, because you, though only a human being, are *making yourself God*” (John 10:31-33).

Jesus was never ‘making himself God’. His claim is to be ‘God’s Son’ (John 10:36). He enjoyed such intimate communion with God that he could say: ‘The Father is in me and I am in the Father’ (John 10:38; see also John 14:11). The Spirit of God filled his heart, his prayer, his life, and he revealed God in the love that flowed from this communion, a love, as noted earlier, that gave authority to his words, and healing and liberating power to his relationships.

Jesus' disciples were astonished at Jesus' intimacy with God, and at the extraordinary love that poured out from Jesus' heart and brought healing to so many. They knew that this healing came from God through 'Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders and signs that God did through him' (Acts 2:22).

Paul writes: 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself' (2Corinthians 5:19);

'God our Saviour poured out on us the Holy Spirit through Jesus the Messiah our Saviour' (Titus 3:6).

It was their experiences of the crucified Jesus as raised by God to life and mysteriously present among them that alerted them to a more profound dimension of Jesus' communion with God. They came to see that in raising Jesus to life, 'God has made this crucified Jesus both Lord (Κύριος) and Messiah' (Acts 2:36).

The Greek Κύριος translates the Hebrew Adonay, which was the word sounded when YHWH was found in the Hebrew text. It is the 'Name' (HaShem) revealed by God to Moses in the scene of the burning bush when God commissioned Moses to go to Egypt and be God's instrument in liberating the Hebrew slaves (see Exodus 3:15). In calling Jesus 'Lord' Paul is witnessing to a Christian practice that goes right back to the beginnings of the Christian movement. Christian Jews never wavered from strict monotheism, but their experience of Jesus during his life and after his resurrection meant that their understanding of God expanded to include Jesus.

The authors of the New Testament were not philosophers and they show no interest in attempting to explore the inner, necessarily mysterious, nature of God's Being. They speak of 'God'. They speak of God's 'Word': God's will to give expression to God's Self in sharing God's Being through creation. It is this divine Word that finds perfect human expression in the man Jesus (John 1:14). They speak of God's 'Spirit', when referring to the ways in which God's power and God's action are revealed in the world. John declares that in Jesus God 'gives the Spirit without reserve' (John 3:34).

The writers of the New Testament were fully aware that no words can comprehend God's Being. But their awareness of the special communion between Jesus and God finds expression in the Trinitarian Father, Son and Spirit. 'Father' picks up Jesus' intimacy in speaking of God. 'Son' speaks of Jesus in this intimate communion. 'Spirit' speaks of the love that flowed between God and Jesus. It is this 'Trinity' that Matthew has in mind in the conclusion of his Gospel, when the Risen and Exalted Jesus commissions his disciples: 'Go and make disciples of all the nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' (Matthew 28:19).



The 'Trinity' of God, Jesus and the Spirit alerts us to the truth that we can understand creation only when we acknowledge the relationship of every creature to God who holds everything in existence and God's Holy Spirit that energises everything and draws everything to find itself in participating in the Being of God. It does more: it opens the way to see God differently. While never wavering from monotheism, and while knowing that we humans cannot comprehend God, we came to think of God as a Communion of Love..

The words 'Father', 'Son' and 'Spirit' are perhaps best kept for the 'Trinity' we discussed in the previous paragraph.

If we are speaking of the inner nature of God words like 'Self-bestowing Source', 'Word' and 'Love-communion' seem more appropriate. God is the Self-bestowing Source of everything that exists. God is the Word that is the perfect expression of this Source. God is the Love-communion of the divine Source and the divine Word.

None of this claims to define God, but, thanks to Jesus, we know that God is Love-Communion, and that everything that exists does so because of God's Self-gift. As John says: God's 'Word is towards God' (John 1:1). God's 'Let it be' (Genesis 1:3) flows from this divine communion, so that every created being participates in this love, this divine 'Spirit', and is drawn into this divine love-communion.

Christian monotheism is beautifully enriched by Christian teaching of the Trinity: a 'Trinity' understood firstly as God, Jesus and the Spirit of Love that flowed between them; a 'Trinity' understood secondly as daring to speak of God as the Origin of all, as the divine Word, and as the divine Spirit. Transcending creation, God is Love-Communion, and it is this Communion that is expressed in, and is experienced by, the cosmos: our amazing home and everything that makes up our universe. Christian faith opens us to welcome God's gift of God's Self in love, in the threefold giving that is the gift of the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5), the gift of the Divine Word made flesh and dwelling amongst us (John 1:14), the gift of union with the Origin of all, who is Originating Love'(1 John 4:8,16).

The Quran misunderstands the Christian belief in the Trinity. It thinks that Christians worship Jesus and Mary as two gods beside God.

‘O People of the Book! Do not exaggerate in your religion, nor utter anything concerning God save the truth. Verily the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only a messenger of God, and his Word, which he committed to Mary, and a Spirit from Him. So believe in God and His messengers, and say not “Three” (Sûrah 4:171, from Medina).

‘When God said, “O Jesus son of Mary! Didst thou say unto mankind, ‘Take me and my mother as gods apart from God’? (Sûrah 5:116, from Medina).

Again and again the Quran insists that God does not have a son or a consort (Sûrahs 2:116, 6:101, 10:68, 17:111, 18:4, 19:88, 21:26, 72.3 and 112). This language is appropriate as a criticism of the pagan tribes of Arabia, but reveals a misunderstanding of Christian belief.

We don't know how Muhammad's Christian contemporaries in Arabia expressed their Trinitarian faith, but there is a warning for us today to be careful with our words, lest today's Muslims think that, in spite of our claim to be monotheists, we do in fact believe in three gods.

Jesus' disciples began by getting to know Jesus. He was clearly a human being, but there was something quite special about him. It was his healing love. Gradually they came to see that this amazing love came from his special communion with God, whom he addressed as 'Abba' ('Father'). Knowing God as 'Father', Jesus knew himself as God's 'Son'. We believe that there is only one God, the God whom Jesus addressed as 'Father', and this God is revealed in Jesus, his 'Son', and most intimately in Jesus' prayer, in the communion of love he enjoyed with his 'Father', the communion of love we speak of as the 'Holy Spirit'.

The New Testament speaks of 'God' nearly twelve hundred times. The reference is to the One Jesus addressed as 'God' and 'Father'. However, it was not long before the Christian community embraced the practice of including Jesus when they spoke of 'God'. We find this in a letter written in the opening years of the second century to the community in Ephesus by Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch: 'Our God, even Jesus the Christ, was borne in the womb by Mary according to the dispensation of God, of the seed of David and of the Holy Ghost' (Ephesians 18). In a letter to the community in Rome he writes: 'Suffer me to copy the passion of my God' (Romans, 6).

It is possible that an example of this this practice is found in the Prologue to John's Gospel, composed in the last decade of the first century. Some early manuscripts read: 'No one has ever seen God. It is the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, who has made God known' (John 1:18). Other manuscripts include the word 'God' and read: 'It is God the only Son'.

The early Christian practice of calling Jesus 'God' witnesses to the fact that they were not content to admire the human Jesus, while failing to see him as the revelation of God: failing to listen to or watch God being revealed in and through him. The essence of Christianity is that in listening to Jesus and watching him, and in experiencing something of the intimacy of his prayer-communion, we are truly being drawn into communion with God. When we Christians say that Jesus is God, or say that Mary is 'the mother of God', this is a shorthand way of drawing attention to the truths I have tried to open up in that last few paragraphs. Jesus is not another God. He is fully human, but in such an extraordinary purity that it is God, the one God in whom Jesus and Christians believe, who is revealed in and through him.

Christians speak of Jesus as having two natures. The word 'nature' is a scientific term born of observation. We come to know something's 'nature' by observing what it does. When his disciples watched Jesus and listened to him his humanity was obvious. He showed them what we human beings can be at our best. But they saw more than this: they came to see that what Jesus was saying and doing was revealing God as God is revealed in a human being. That is Jesus' divine nature. He invites everyone to share this nature with him. He wants us to share the intimate communion that he has with God, so that we, too, will speak God's words and be instruments to each other of God's life-giving love.

When we say that 'Jesus is God' and that 'the Holy Spirit is God', and that 'Mary is the mother of God', we want to say something very beautiful about God and about Jesus. In no way do we intend to say that God is not One. Jesus' claim was to be 'the Son of God' in the sense that God is the source of his life and of everything he says and does.

Jesus' followers were amazed at the purity and beauty of Jesus' love. Because of Jesus' teaching and actions, they came to see that God, the one God who is the source of all and who holds everything and everyone in existence, is Self-bestowing Love and that the human Jesus was totally caught up in this divine love. It was God who healed through Jesus. It was God who loved through Jesus. It was God who forgave through Jesus. Jesus and the God he called 'Father' were one in a complete communion. It is their mutual love that is spoken of as 'The Holy Spirit'. It was God's will that Jesus share this Spirit of love with his disciples, and ultimately with every person on earth.

Paul ends his Second Letter to the Christian community in Corinth with the prayer: ‘The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you’ (2 Corinthians 13:13-14). It was largely their experience of sharing in this love that explains the growth of Christian communities and that attracted people to find in the Christian community a way of life that satisfied their search for meaning.

As Paul wrote in his Letter to the Christian community in Rome: 'Hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us' (Romans 5:5). And to the community in Philippi he wrote: 'If there is any appeal in Christ, any consolation from love, any communion in the Spirit, any movements of compassion and feelings of love, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being of one soul and one mind' (Philippians 2:1-2).

We cannot see the Transcendent God, but we believe that in watching the human Jesus we are watching how God wishes to reveal God's Self in human form. Jesus says: 'Whoever sees me has seen the Father' (John 14:9). When we speak of God's 'Word', we are speaking of God achieving God's will through creating, forgiving and embracing in love. We Christians see Jesus as expressing this in a fully beautiful human way.

When we believe that in seeing Jesus we are seeing God, we are not believing that we are seeing another God, but the One God. When we say that Mary is the 'Mother of God' we are speaking in the light of what I have just described. We are not saying that the One God had a human mother. We are saying that her human son, Jesus, is the perfect expression of God in human form. The focus is on Jesus, and on Jesus who points to the one God, whom he called 'Father' because everything he is and everything he has and everything he does came from God, to whose divine will he always submitted.

Christianity preserves the Transcendence of the One God. We also believe that this One God is constantly active in history, and Jesus helps us to see and feel what this loving presence and action is like. He enables us to find human words to direct us to better ways of thinking of God. He is a constant corrective to our tendency to misunderstand God by imposing on God our limited concepts and customary habits of thinking.

God is a communion in love. It follows that the whole of creation exists because it is a finite participation in the very being of God. Everything is an expression (a limited, imperfect, but real expression) of God. Everything belongs, because everything is held in existence by, and gives expression to, the One God.

Never is our teaching concerning God intended to compromise Jesus' belief and our belief in the truth we share with our Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters, that there is one God. Seeing Jesus as the Word of God in human form reminds us to listen to all the ways God speaks to us. Watching Jesus inspired by God reminds us to wonder at the way God breathes in each of us, embracing us in love and drawing us into full listening (full obedience, full submission) to God who is breathing in us and drawing us all into love-communion. The God revealed by Jesus is a God of all-embracing, all-encompassing, Love.



Hymn to the Holy Spirit