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Book review: Christology in Dialogue with Muslims

by CM

Christology in Dialogue with Muslims, Mark Beaumont, 2005, 228 pages. Available from AWM Loughborough.

Many in our company will remember Mark Beaumont with affection from his time in Morocco. Since then he has been teaching at the Birmingham Christian College. In 2003 he received a PhD from the Open University for the book under review, which has had some minor revision since.

The book analyses in detail two periods of Christian dialogue and debate with Muslims: the ninth and twentieth centuries. After introducing each period, Beaumont chooses three outstanding representative figures: for the ninth century, Abu Qurra, Abu Raita and Ammar al-Basri; for the twentieth, Kenneth Cragg, John Hick and Hans Kung. He also includes a careful analysis of the anonymous *Sira al-Masih*, a Qur'anic style harmony of the gospels in Arabic, which appeared in 1987.

Three ninth-century Christian apologists

The author must be commended for the very thorough and careful research that has gone into this work. The three theologians chosen as the outstanding representatives of Christian apologetics in the ninth century will almost certainly be unknown to most of us. Writing in Arabic, they defended the gospel to their Muslim

conquerors with care and respect. By comparing the works that they wrote for a Christian audience with those they produced for Muslims (or, at least, for Christians wanting to answer Muslims), Beaumont shows how they adapted their language and presentation to make Christian concepts clear to the Muslim.

They were not afraid to argue from concepts and verses in the Qur'an. For example, Abu Raita took the verses that refer to God's sitting on his throne to argue that the Incarnation is a legitimate and possible concept. If God can be imagined as being transcendent and yet seated on a throne, surely He can also be imagined as having a localised presence – in a body – and yet at the same time be unlimited by any constraints. They also argued cogently for the appropriateness of the title 'Son of God', with God's fatherhood being understood metaphorically.

The three ninth-century apologists came from three different Christian traditions:

- ♦ Chalcedonian – Abu Qurra, holding that Christ had two distinct natures, divine and human, in one person;
- ♦ Monophysite (or Jacobite) – Abu Raita, holding that Christ had one nature in one person, since the divine predominated over the human;
- ♦ Nestorian – Ammar al-Basri, holding that in Christ there were two persons, both human and divine.

Interestingly, only Ammar presented a truly human Christ who struggled with temptation yet overcame it. For both Abu Qurra and Abu Raita, the power of the divine nature meant that Christ could not fail. However, this doctrinal division clearly weakened the case of Christianity in general, since it gave the impression that even among themselves, Christians were divided and uncertain about what they believed.

While the three apologists could argue convincingly for the Incarnation and the divine sonship of Christ, they all struggled with the Qur'an's denial of his crucifixion and death (Sura 4.157). In their position as subjects to Muslim rulers, they could not directly contradict the Qur'an. So they contented themselves with affirming Christ's death in atonement for sin and his resurrection, and did not enter into controversy on the subject.

As we read Beaumont's careful analysis of their works, we must admire the faithfulness of these apologists to the gospel and the genuine attempt they made to explain it to the Muslim. It is striking that the same questions they dealt with regarding the Incarnation, sonship and death of Christ are still often asked today, and in the same language. As a means of communication for theological matters, Arabic seems to have remained substantially the same through the centuries.

Following the ninth century, Christians in the Middle East became increasingly marginalised, and were often persecuted. Meaningful dialogue and de-

bate with their Muslim rulers faded away. From the side of the West, there were some brave attempts in the Middle Ages, but a sustained and in-depth exchange between Christians and Muslims did not begin again until the nineteenth century. This came as a result of the growth of European self-confidence, colonisation, the studies of the Orientalists and, above all, the modern missionary movement. Beaumont looks first at the labours of Pfander (*The Balance of Truth*) and Ibrahim Luqa (*Christianity in Islam*) before launching into the analysis of his three modern representatives: Cragg, Hick and Kung.

Three twentieth-century apologists

By this time, another significant factor had come on the scene of which Muslims were also very much aware: liberal biblical scholarship. Here I cannot but regret that Beaumont was not able to choose a committed evangelical as one of his representatives for the twentieth century. In his introduction he explains:

There are a number of writers who have dialogued with Muslims from a fairly traditional Christological perspective.... However, they do not match Cragg's innovative approach to Muslims. Kung and Hick have no competition for inclusion, since they are the only twentieth century apologists to present Christ on the basis of modern gospel scholarship rather than the teaching of the Apostles or the Creeds of the church. (p. xxi)

Of the author's three selected representatives, only Cragg is close to an evangelical position. He affirms Christ's divinity and his atoning death for sin, but not the infallibility of Scripture. One of his

main concerns in apologetics is to urge Muslims to recognise that the Incarnation is indeed a possible action for a God who is truly great. Like Hick and Kung, he is anxious to put the spotlight on the historical Jesus, rather than to enter into debates about his divinity.

Although they have participated in high-level dialogues with Muslim scholars, Hick, in particular, and Kung have rather less to offer for evangelicals. The former denies the divinity of Jesus and sees him only as a man who was exceptionally conscious of God. He would regard Muhammad in the same way. For the sake of good relations with Muslims, he is also prepared to ignore the problem of the Qur'an's denial of Jesus' death. Kung does not uphold Jesus' divinity in the terms of the Nicene Creed – 'one substance (or "being") with the Father'. But he is firm on the importance of the historical reality of Jesus' death. He also emphasises that Jesus taught the superiority of love over law-keeping and that he forgave sin. His position is, therefore, more clearly distinct from Islam than Hick's.

However, as Beaumont points out, neither Hick nor Kung can speak with authority for the majority of the Christian community. Hick 'can only speak for a small number of like-minded theologians' (p.191) and Kung's Christology 'departs from mainstream Catholic doctrine which continues to insist on the Incarnation and atonement as essential to faith in Christ' (p.193).

'Sira al-Masih'

Perhaps more interesting for us is the author's evaluation of *Sira*. I remember seeing this work at the Marseille Media Centre in the early 1990s. However, we did not use it or send it out to correspondents. As Beaumont's thorough analysis shows, it is a free harmony of the four Gospels in an Islamic style. It cannot be called a translation or even a paraphrase. Rather, it is an adaptation.

It would be most interesting to know if there is any feedback on the use of this work. Has the Lord blessed it and have people come to know Christ through it? Is it a real way forward or is it a diversion? The authors of *Sira* have taken several significant liberties with the New Testament text. In particular, they have suppressed most of the Father / Son language. Even the Lord's Prayer begins with 'Allahumma' ('O God'), rather than 'Abana' ('Our Father'). Beaumont summarises its Christology as teaching that '*Sira's* Christ has no identity of being with God, although he does appear to have an eternal relationship with Him' (p.193). On the other hand, Christ's death is presented clearly and he even predicts it eight times (as opposed to the three times in the Synoptic Gospels).

Beaumont's evaluation of *Sira* is, on the whole, positive. He describes it as a 'fresh and original attempt to attract Muslim readers to an essentially Christian narrative' (p.187). But he notes that it will probably struggle to gain acceptance. It is unlikely to be appreciated by Arab Christians. If a Muslim reader is attracted by it, he or she will later want to turn to the

New Testament to learn more and then he will come up against all the features which *Sira* attempts to play down. Might this not cause him to question whether Christians really have the original gospel? Which should he regard as reliable: *Sira* or the four Gospels?

Clearly, this brings us into a wider debate on contextualisation. Beaumont's final comment on *Sira* is that 'creative theology in dialogue comes up against traditional modes of expressing faith held by the majority to be essential' (p. 194). But is it fair to describe the Gospels – or close translations of them – as 'traditional modes of expressing faith'? Are they not rather the rock on which everything else is built?

Conclusion

Beaumont's book is an academic study at a high level, yet it has much of interest for us. The ideas and concepts that he

explores are very relevant to discussion with Muslims today. At the level of language, for those relating to Muslims in Arabic, there are things to learn from the three ninth-century apologists. Dialogue has its limits, as Beaumont recognises, but it needs to go alongside proclamation. It is still essential for us to listen carefully and to be sure we are communicating in terms the Muslim will understand. Ultimately, barring some kind of special pleading, it is not possible by dialogue to reconcile two contradictory positions: either Christ died or he did not. But it is possible to clarify the positions of both sides and to communicate with respect.

Let's pray that the Lord will raise up more defenders of the gospel who can engage in dialogue, debate and proclamation from a firmly evangelical standpoint, relying on the truth of the Bible as God's Word.