

## Being Mocked: The Essence of Christ's Work, not Muhammad's

*by John Piper*

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### **Fresh Words Edition**

What we saw this past week in the Islamic demonstrations over the Danish cartoons of Muhammad was another vivid depiction of the difference between Muhammad and Christ, and what it means to follow each. Not all Muslims approve the violence. But a deep lesson remains: The work of Muhammad is based on being honored and the work of Christ is based on being insulted. This produces two very different reactions to mockery.

If Christ had not been insulted, there would be no salvation. This was his saving work: to be insulted and die to rescue sinners from the wrath of God. Already in the Psalms the path of mockery was promised: "All who see me mock me; they make mouths at me; they wag their heads" (Psalm 22:7). "He was despised and rejected by men . . . as one from whom men hide their faces . . . and we esteemed him not" (Isaiah 53:3).

When it actually happened it was worse than expected. "They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on his head. . . . And kneeling before him, they mocked him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' And they spit on him" (Matthew 27:28-30). His response to all this was patient endurance. This was the work he came to do. "Like a lamb that is led to the

slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth" (Isaiah 53:7).

This was not true of Muhammad. And Muslims do not believe it is true of Jesus. Most Muslims have been taught that Jesus was not crucified. One Sunni Muslim writes, "Muslims believe that Allah saved the Messiah from the ignominy of crucifixion."<sup>1</sup> Another adds, "We honor [Jesus] more than you [Christians] do. . . . We refuse to believe that God would permit him to suffer death on the cross."<sup>2</sup> An essential Muslim impulse is to avoid the "ignominy" of the cross.

That's the most basic difference between Christ and Muhammad and between a Muslim and a follower of Christ. For Christ, enduring the mockery of the cross was the essence of his mission. And for a true follower of Christ enduring suffering patiently for the glory of Christ is the essence of obedience. "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account" (Matthew 5:11). During his life on earth Jesus was called a bastard (John 8:41), a drunkard (Matthew 11:19), a blasphemer (Matthew 26:65), a devil (Matthew 10:25); and he promised his followers the same: "If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household" (Matthew 10:25).

The caricature and mockery of Christ has continued to this day. Martin Scorsese portrayed Jesus in *The Last Temptation of Christ* as wracked with doubt and beset with sexual lust. Andres Serrano was funded by the National Endowment for the Arts to portray Jesus on a cross sunk in a bottle of urine. The *Da Vinci Code* portrays Jesus as a mere mortal who married and fathered children.

How should his followers respond? On the one hand, we are grieved and angered. On the other hand, we identify with Christ, and embrace his suffering, and rejoice in our afflictions, and say with the apostle Paul that vengeance belongs to the Lord, let us love our enemies and win them with the gospel. If Christ did his work by being insulted, we must do ours likewise.

When Muhammad was portrayed in twelve cartoons in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*, the uproar across the Muslim world was intense and sometimes violent. Flags were burned, embassies were torched, and at least one Christian church was stoned. The

cartoonists went into hiding in fear for their lives, like Salman Rushdie before them. What does this mean?

It means that a religion with no insulted Savior will not endure insults to win the scoffers. It means that this religion is destined to bear the impossible load of upholding the honor of one who did not die and rise again to make that possible. It means that Jesus Christ is still the only hope of peace with God and peace with man. And it means that his followers must be willing to “share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death” (Philippians 3:10).

#### Footnotes

- 1 Badru D. Kateregga and David W. Shenk, *Islam and Christianity: A Muslim and a Christian in Dialogue* (Nairobi: Usima Press, 1980), p. 141.
- 2 Quoted from *The Muslim World* in J. Dudley Woodberry, editor, *Muslims and Christians on the Emmaus Road* (Monrovia, CA: MARC, 1989), p. 164.

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