

THE UMMA AND THE CHURCH: THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

by David W. Shenk

"Why don't Christians follow the way of Jesus?" a Muslim asked. I was dining with a close friend, a Muslim, in the Blue Nile Restaurant in Washington, D.C., when he leaned close and asked that disturbing question.

He continued slowly, pensively, "When I read the Gospel, I am overjoyed. The life and teachings of Jesus are wonderful, wonderful, really, truly wonderful. But, please show me Christians who are willing to follow in the sunna (way) of Jesus."

We sipped our cardamom spiced tea in reflective silence and then he continued. "I have met a few, very few people who try to follow Jesus. But they follow him only in their private lives. Consequently your American society has become very evil. It seems to me that you Christians really do not believe that the sunna of Jesus is practical. That makes me very sad."

Theological and Practical Problems

Both the Muslim Umma and the Christian Church are communities of God-fearing believers. Both believe they have received from God a mission in the world. In meeting one another, we experience commonality and pain. In fact, Islam is a profound challenge to Christian perceptions and commitment to be the people of God. There are several reasons for this:

(1) Islam is a post-Christian movement of God-fearing people. Within the New Testament, God-fearing Gentiles were recognized with appreciation as people who had moved closer to the truth than their polytheistic contemporaries (Acts 10:34-36). These pre-Christian God-fearers were exceptionally receptive to Christian faith. Islam, on the other hand, presents a theological problem which has no precedent in the New Testament, a monotheistic faith which is post Christian, and which was birthed in a Christianized environment.

In Islam we see the etchings of aspects of Christian faith. Islam is a form of Arian Christianity, but unlike Arianism, Islam has flourished outside the modifying discipline and witness of Christian experience and Biblical revelation. Therefore, although Arianism within the Church finally withered into oblivion, Islam has thrived as a movement outside the bounds of churchly discipline.

(2) Islam began as the quest of a people for inclusion in the people

of God. Islam seeks to embrace and be embraced by all God-fearers. It began as a quest by the Arab people for inclusion, and now invites all people to participate in the blessing of that inclusion.

In the seventh century, Arabia was largely encircled by Christian peoples. The advanced Christianized cultures--Ethiopian, Egyptian, and Syrian--on the Arabian periphery had the Bible in their native languages. The pagan, nomadic Arabs were living in ignorance (*jahiliyya*), an ignorance perpetuated through exclusion from the community of the people of the book. For nascent Islam, the Arabic book (Qur'an) and Arabian Prophet were the good news that the Arab peoples are now also included. The *da'wah* (invitation) of Islam is the good news that all other peoples are also invited to enjoy inclusion in the community of peace, the people of God. The inclusiveness of the invitation, as well as the detestation for all forms of exclusivism, is revealed in the Muslim conviction that everyone everywhere is born a Muslim. The success of Islamic mission is therefore not statistically measurable. All are born Muslim: Islamic mission is to invite people to affirm the reality of inclusion.

(3) Islam's most rapid missionary expansion has been through the Islamization of Christianized societies. Within one century of its birth, Islam had gained control of half of the Christianized world. In all Christianized societies ruled by Muslim governments, there has been a steady flow of converts from the Church to Islam. Political techniques such as the *dhimmi* (protected) status for the church, or the application of forms of the law of apostasy to Muslims who would convert to Christianity have combined to ensure that the net flow of conversions always favored Islam. In all countries ruled by Muslim governments, contracting Christian communities in relationship to Islam have been the norm. Islam confronts the Church with church growth in reverse.

(4) Muslims believe that Islam is the primal, middle, and final religion of mankind, given as a mercy for all people. It is the faith of Adam, Abraham, and Muhammad: in fact all true prophets are Muslims. All necessary truth is succinctly summarized in the Qur'an, which is the criterion of all truth. God-fearers weep with joy when hearing the Qur'an recited. From an Islamic perspective, the fundamental test as to whether one is a person of faith is one's personal response to the Qur'an and belief in the Prophet of Islam. In relationship to professed believers in God, the foremost question in the mind of Muslims is this: "What do you believe concerning the Qur'an and the Prophet?" A lack of commitment to the Prophet and the Book suggests that one's professed faith commitment is not genuine, and the dialogue is subsequently often broken. (Qur'an 84:20-25)

(5) The Islamic commitment to *tauhid* (the unity of God) profoundly affects the Muslim commitment to community. Belief in the unity of God is pragmatically reflected in the unity and harmony of the community which lives under the law of God. According to Ali Shariati, belief in *tauhid* is commitment to the exorcism of all aspects of disequilibrium. All forms of disharmony are *shirk*, that is the

adding of associates to divinity. The Umma is commanded by God to protect the community of faith from shirk. The community must be protected from all forms of disharmony, including the destabilization which can occur through unregulated religious pluralism, or the dichotomization of life into secular and spiritual realms. Tauhid is the experience and expression of personal and social integration and harmony under the revealed will of God. Within the framework of tauhid, church growth which in any sense seems to threaten the integrity of the Umma, the "Dar al Islam," is normally perceived as contributory to disharmony: it is a form of shirk.

How should the Church respond theologically to the Islamic world view, as briefly outlined above. It is tempting to side step the issues. It is interesting that contemporary church growth writings are heavily oriented towards communication theory and anthropology, with a parallel dearth of theological reflection. At the Colorado Springs Consultation on Muslim Evangelization (1978) only one of the thirteen foundational papers attempted an in-depth probe of the theological issues. Seven of the papers related to cultural dynamics. The underlying assumption seemed to be that the fundamental objection of Islam to the Gospel is western culture, that if the Gospel gets clothed in appropriate cultural forms, the theological objections will be easily surmounted. Is this really the case? It is noteworthy that at Colorado Springs all of the case studies came from marginally Islamized peoples. There was no serious reflection on how to share the Gospel with devout Muslims living under orthodox Muslim governments.

A Question from the Umma to the Church

Could it be that we hesitate to accept theological or community engagement with Islam, because we are embarrassed by the questions which the Umma addresses to the Church? Yet if we would listen, we might discover that through the questions which Islam addresses to us, our own perceptions of the Gospel will be purified, and in the purification process the Gospel itself will become more attractive and life changing for Christians, and hopefully also for our Muslim friends.

There are a number of disturbing questions which the Umma presents to the church. I shall comment on one of these which has already been alluded to in the introductory conversation: "Why don't you follow Jesus?" Said another way, "Why don't you who believe in Jesus commit yourself to the Kingdom of God as lived and practiced by Jesus?"

Many Muslims suspect that we really don't believe in the practicality of Jesus. "How can anyone love his enemy?" I have often been asked. I have frequently gone to mosques in East Africa and listened to the sermons. It is surprising how often Muslim preachers proclaim Islam as the practical faith in contrast to Christianity which is far too idealistic. Thus the question, "Why don't you follow Jesus?" is also a form of Muslim witness. It is often a form of invitation to follow Muhammad the pragmatic prophet.

Nevertheless, there is more to the question than a subtle invitation to accept Islam. The question also reflects the Muslim commitment to tauhid, (the unity of every dimension of life under the rule of God). Muslims who know Christians are often disturbed at the easy manner in which many western Christians violate tauhid by cosily dividing life into secular and sacred, public and private, temporal and spiritual.

However, Jesus also commanded tauhid: in fact from a Biblical perspective he is the perfect revelation of tauhid. He is the breakthrough into history of cosmic harmony. From a Muslim perspective, cosmic harmony has been marvelously revealed in the Qur'an, whereas the Biblical witness is that the eternal Word is revealed in Jesus himself. The divergence between the Book (Qur'anic guidance) and the Person (Jesus, the Redeemer) is the issue which drives a theological and practical wedge between Islam and Christianity. This divergence propels Islam toward a nomistic organization of society (i.e. based on religious law), whereas the Christian is more pneumatically oriented. In Islam there is tremendous concern about submitting to codified guidance, whereas in the Christian experience one is called to live in the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

Islamic perplexity concerning Christian life and commitment, however, is not necessarily contingent on the different views of the essence of revealed harmony. Rather the Umma asks why we so often fail to commit ourselves to the One whom we profess as Lord. Jesus, as the dramatic breakthrough of the Kingdom of God, announced at the beginning of his ministry that he has come to preach good news to the poor, freedom for the prisoners, sight for the blind, release for the oppressed (Luke 4:16-21). In his life, Jesus revealed that this radically new Kingdom order is effectuated through redemptive suffering love, supremely revealed in his crucifixion and resurrection. Cosmic harmony is, in Jesus' life, the total commitment to love, even one's enemies. But one cannot live that way without suffering. That is the issue.

Western Christianity, especially, has developed neat theological escape hatches. For multitudes of Christians, the Kingdom life applies only to private life: it is not applicable to public life. We have developed a dual citizenship theology. We dichotomize life into spiritual and secular. Jesus is Lord of the spiritual, but not of the secular.

The Islamic question is really a plea, an invitation to Christians to take tauhid seriously, to really reflect the Kingdom of God in every area of life. I recently heard Dr. Ala' Eddin Kharafa speaking to an assembly of Christian church leaders. Dr. Kharafa is Director of the Muslim World League of North America and the representative of the League to the United Nations. He pointed out that an absolutely foundational commitment of the League is the transcendence of the Umma over nationalism. He assured us that there is only one Muslim nation. All nationalisms which segment the unity of the nation of Islam are aberrations of the Reality of Islam.

The nation state is a recent phenomenon for Muslims. It is a residual consequence of western imperial intrusions into the nation of Islam and the overthrow of the caliphate during the Turkish revolution (1924). In spite of the blessings of independence, there is deep disquiet among many Muslims because the nation state represents a fractured Umma. Dr. Kharafa pointed out that for the Muslim any national allegiance which supersedes loyalty and commitment to the total community of faith is wrong. The Shiite theologian, Dr. Ali Shariati, refers to nationalistic division in the Umma as shirk, or idolatry. Tauhid is harmony: it is the participation in fraternal commitment to one another; it is participation in the "Dar al-Salaam" (Region of Peace) which is not fractured by nationalism.

Biblical faith also teaches that national loyalties dare not supersede loyalty to the Kingdom of God: when the two conflict, the follower of Jesus has only one option, that is the Jesus way. Justice, peace, righteousness, the cause of the dispossessed and poor, the urgent invitation to participate in a redeemed and joyous relationship with God and the believing community are aspects of the kaleidoscope of Kingdom living. Jesus dramatically proclaimed the transnational nature of the kingdom of God by calling his disciples to seek the Kingdom rather than those things which the nations seek. (Luke 12:30) And on the night of his arrest he said, "My Kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight..." (John 18:36)

The Islamic plea to take tauhid seriously should rekindle within Christians a sincere commitment to live and give witness to the fact that God's intention is "to bring all things in Heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ." (Ephesians 1:10) The Church in mission is called by God to be an authentic sign that God's intention for the cosmos has already broken into history.

An Invitation from the Church to the Umma

Although both the Christians and Muslims should ideally perceive of the Kingdom of God as tauhid, there is a significant divergence in their respective perceptions of the nature of mission, community, and the Kingdom of God. For the sake of simplicity let me suggest that this divergence is revealed in the Hijra versus the Cross.

The Hijra is the flight from suffering in Mecca to the triumph of Medina. While Muhammad was still in Mecca, the Medinans invited him to become statesman of their city. The Hijra is his acceptance of this invitation. In Mecca, Muhammad was a persecuted, lonely prophet, but in Medina he became both prophet and statesman. In Mecca the Umma was incomplete: it possessed no symbols of power. In Medina all the mechanisms of political, economic, cultural, and religious power were brought under the rule of God through the statesmanship of the prophet. In Mecca the prophet was victimized by his enemies, but in Medina he was triumphant over his enemies: military victory over the enemies of the Muslims became a sign of the favor of the Lord upon the Umma.

The Hijra represents the great theological divide between Islam and Christianity. It is a theological movement in the opposite direction from that chosen by Jesus of Nazareth six centuries earlier. The Hijra is the affirmation that the will of God is invulnerable to the devices of evil men. It is a profound denial of the way of the Cross in God's dealings with man. Jesus, similarly to Muhammad, was also offered the handles of political and economic power by the Galilean Zealots. They also desired to make him captain of their incipient Umma, a community dedicated to the establishment of freedom and the rule of God through political power. But Jesus explicitly and deliberately rejected the statesmanship road to establishing the rule of God. On the contrary, he thereafter "set His face" to go to Jerusalem, where he met the Cross. He chose to lay down his life in an act of total vulnerability, rather than save his life through political or military means. The Cross is the ultimate sign of God's total redemptive vulnerability. God establishes His rule through redemptive love.

The Cross versus the Hijra. This is the fundamental theological impasse between Islam and Christianity. The impasse is so profound, that Islam is tempted, and frequently explicitly yields to the temptation, of denying the crucifixion of Christ. The denial of the crucifixion is not based on historical criteria, but rather on theological necessity. Jesus is the Messiah, Islam affirms. If he is the Messiah, then he certainly could not be crucified by evil men. With agony etched across his face, a dear Muslim friend recently said, "I just can't accept that Jesus died on the Cross. He is too good a man for that. It seems to me that the Cross suggests weakness, vulnerability by God. I cannot, I just cannot believe that God would permit the Messiah to suffer in that way."

The Hijra versus the Cross are fundamental theological divergencies which explicitly and implicitly inform the manner in which the Muslim Umma and the Christian Church perceive of themselves and their respective mission in the world. A few examples will suffice. The Umma suffers from incompleteness until it possesses the mechanisms of political power. The Church, although it may try to influence political processes, usually feels uncomfortable actually possessing political structures. The Umma attempts to reform society through the application of Islamic law, the Sharia. The Church attempts to transform society from within by being a leaven and a light to the society. The Umma considers righteous suffering to be abnormal, a situation which needs to be rectified. The Church perceives of suffering love as being fundamentally central to the manner in which God redeems the nations. The Church is truest to its calling when it gives of itself in suffering love.

We must repent of the temptation to become "Islamized Christians". The two communities are established on different theological foundations, the Hijra versus the Cross. And the respective approaches to a wide variety of human problems and issues are informed by these fundamentally different starting off points: human rights, religion

and state, ministries to the poor and dispossessed, human and economic development, secularization, religious propagation, conversion, organization of society, attitudes towards enemies of the community, progress and change, approaches to mission, and even marriage and family.

A Bridge

Nevertheless, buried deep within the mind of Islam there is a sign of possible implicit theological commonality with the Christian Church. It is the sign of sacrifice. The sign is developed in the tradition: it is not developed in the Qur'an. Muslims believe that God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son, but that before the actual slaying of the lad, God intervened and provided a ram for a substitutionary sacrifice. (In Islamic tradition the lad was Ishmael, but in the Bible the lad was Isaac. Yet sacrifice is present in both accounts.) Both Islam and Christianity agree that a son of Abraham was saved by the sacrifice of a ram. In fact, Islam traces the embryonic origin of its distinctive peoplehood to this event, for the traditions add that, not only was Ishmael saved by the sacrifice of the ram, but Abraham and Ishmael cleansed the sacred Ka'ba in Mecca and established the true worship of Allah there.

Every year Muslims celebrate this salvation event in the feast of Id al-Kabir on the tenth of Dhu'l-Hijjah. This is the pilgrimage when hundreds of thousands of Muslims from nations everywhere come to Mecca to celebrate their common peoplehood under the Law of God. At the climax of the pilgrimage millions of Muslim families around the world slay an animal and feast together, celebrating the salvation of the son of Abraham from death through the salvation of a ram. The slaying of the animal is a celebration of a son saved from death and the beginnings of the formation of Islamic peoplehood, long before the Hijra, at the time of Abraham himself.

The sign of sacrifice is never developed in Islam. The theological meaning, as Christians perceive it, lies dormant. The sign is a mystery, a mystery which the Gospel could tremendously enrich. The Christian question, the theological question, the Gospel invitation to Islam, is to consider whether in that ram which was sacrificed in place of the son of Abraham, there is not a sign of the deep mystery of God's redemptive sacrifice of the Lamb of God, Jesus the Christ, who gave himself on the Cross for the salvation of the world, the creation of a new redeemed community: it is love which is also expressed in ministry and witness by the Church in mission, the suffering body of Christ ministering in His name.