

“Jesus & the Quran” (Sermon Series on Islam, Part II)

A Sermon Delivered by Rev. Marlin Lavanhar
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I will always remember a painting on the wall of a church in Turkey. It was in Istanbul, which was once known as Constantinople. It was for a time the capitol of the Holy Roman Empire and thus was named after the Emperor Constantine. It was the center of Christianity for many years. Later it would become the capitol of the Ottoman Empire, one of the longest and strongest Muslim empires the world has ever known.

The church I was in dated back to the days of Constantine in the fourth century. The painting depicted two mountainous cliffs separated by a deep dark chasm. On one of the cliffs were hordes of human beings, men, women and children. On the other was God in all of his masculine glory with long white hair and beard. Floating above the dark chasm was a handsome young Jesus. He had one hand reaching over to the people and one hand connecting him (and them) to God.

This was the clearest representation I had ever seen of the Christian notion of Jesus being the bridge between God and humanity. As it says in the Gospel of John, “Jesus said, ‘I am the way and the truth and the light, no one cometh unto the Father but by me.’” (14:6) In Islam, such paintings and representations of God are prohibited. However, if this were a mosque and such images were allowed, the picture would be the same, except for one significant change. The bridge would not be made up of Jesus. It would not be made up of Mohammed! For centuries most westerners have confused the figure of Jesus in Christianity with the figure of Mohammed in Islam. However, if this were a painting depicting the Muslim religion, instead of Jesus being the bridge, a large version of the Quran, the Muslim Holy book, would be laying across the chasm between humanity and God. You see, the Quran is to Islam as Jesus is to Christianity. Each one is considered to be the Word of God made flesh. Each one is thought to be the visible glory of the invisible God. Each one is believed respectively to be the basis of all truth and the foundation of all knowledge...to be God's wisdom and thought made real in our world. Each is deemed to embody the fullness of divinity and to reveal the reality of God. Each is all one needs to know and believe in in order to live in God.

In Christianity it's understood that the word of the Lord has come to many prophets, until finally Jesus Christ came and the “Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” Hebrews 1:1-2 says: “long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways... but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son.” The origin of this idea of the Word of God goes back to ancient philosophy. Prior to the emergence of Christianity, philosophers began to understand God as “the first principle” which was thought to be beyond time and change.

Since God was beyond time and change, these philosophers had to come up with some way to explain how this God could enter the world. God could not be both beyond time and change and also act in this world. So, in order to explain how a timeless God interacted with the world, the philosophers developed the notion of the Logos—which is thought to be a mediating principle. This Logos orders the world and makes it reasonable and intelligible. It can be thought of as the guiding principle of creation. This principle-along with God-pre-existed creation. And while God cannot be in the world, these principles that order the world are by their very nature part of existence.

Without going too far into abstract philosophy let me just say that the way that Christian scholars convinced the intellectuals of their time of the idea that Jesus was God on earth was by explaining that Jesus was the Logos (or Word of God) incarnated. Philosophers knew that an unchanging God could not possibly come into the world of change. However, with a little imagination, God's mediating principle, which was already active in the world could become flesh and bones. It could come to teach us and redeem us and help us know God's will.

Then, when Islam developed six hundred years after Jesus, the notion of the Word becoming flesh took on a new meaning. It is important here to note that Jesus is a central figure in Islam. Muslims believe in the virgin birth of Jesus (as we heard in our reading on Mary), and that he healed the blind and raised the dead. They even believe that on the Day of Judgment, Jesus will come again and return to Jerusalem and human history will come to a close. They believe that Jesus did miracles, and they even tell of miracles not written in the Christian Gospels. One of the miracles of Jesus in the Quran is that he makes a bird out of clay and with the permission of Allah breathes the breath of life into it. Another miracle of Jesus found in the Quran and not in the Gospels is that as an infant in his cradle Jesus is said to have spoken as if he were a mature adult.

In the Quran it is written that Allah says:

O Jesus, son of Mary! Remember My favour unto you and unto your mother; how I strengthened you with the holy Spirit, so that you spoke unto mankind in the cradle as in maturity; and how I taught you the Scripture and Wisdom and the Torah and the Gospel; and how you did shape of clay as it were the likeness of a bird by My permission, and did blow upon it and it [became] a bird by My permission, and you did heal him who was born blind and the leper by My permission . . . (Qur'an 5:109-110)

The reason that the Quran so often repeats the words “by My Permission” is that for Muslims, while Jesus performed many miracles, he is not considered the Son of God or God incarnate or the Word of God.

Like all other major prophets in Islam, when a Muslim says the name Jesus they add to it “May peace be upon him”. They say this when they reference any of the great prophets, from Adam to Abraham, to Joseph to Jesus, and of course Mohammed (peace be upon him.)

As I said before, in Islam the Quran is the Holy Word of God made manifest. One of the reasons that Muslims believe that God sent the Quran through Mohammed was because of this mistake that Christians had made regarding God's teaching, that Jesus Christ was God. For Muslims, the notion that Jesus was God amounts to idolatry and cannot be reconciled with the idea of monotheism.

Due to the errors of Christianity, it is thought by Muslims that God sent one final book. The Torah and the Gospels were God's earlier attempts, but due to human corruption God's message was garbled and misunderstood. So, in this last and final revelation, God was explicit that Jesus is not God and neither is Mohammed. Both are prophets of God and Mohammed (may peace be upon him) is the final prophet.

God also made it clear that this last book cannot be translated from its original Arabic. Each Muslim, from whatever land, must learn Arabic and the Quran must be read in its original tongue. This is not only done to avoid the errors of translation (which have plagued Christianity), but also because it's thought that only the language of Arabic, its sound, its script, and its meaning, can contain the full truth and beauty of God's Word. It was during the month of Ramadan that God began to reveal the Quran to Mohammed. Since the Islamic calendar is based on the lunar cycle, the season of Ramadan changes. This year in this month, Ramadan overlaps with the Christian observance of Advent.

Advent in Christianity is the time before Christmas when Christians wait and anticipate the coming of Jesus. At this time it's customary for Christians to read about the selection of Mary as the mother of God. She was a young peasant from Galilee who was unwed when the angel Gabriel came to ask her to become the mother of God. Tradition has it that Mary was a virgin when she became pregnant. In many ways she was an unlikely vehicle for God to enter the world. She was a poor and unknown woman. In many ways Mohammed in Islam can be compared to Mary in Christianity. He too was an unlikely vehicle for God's Word to enter the world. He was an orphan whose father died before he was born and whose mother died when he was six years old. He went to live with his grandfather who in turn died two years later. Finally his uncle took him in and raised him to be a merchant.

His upbringing is an unglamorous story of loss and grief and dependence. He never learned to read or write. The belief that he was illiterate is central to Islam in that it meant his soul was pure and virginal, undefiled by human knowledge. Like Mary, his purity made him worthy of receiving the Divine Word. He was known in his home city of Mecca as al-Amin –the honest one- which was an unusual title for a merchant from a city that was reputed as a place of extortion and usury.

Increasingly he retreated from the chaos of the city to pray in the mountains around Mecca. And one night, known as the Night of Destiny, the silence of his meditation was broken. Mohammed was in meditation in a cave on the mountain of Hira when he too, like Mary before him, was visited by the angel Gabriel—the messenger of God. It has been written that:

This was Muhammad's first experience of revelation. After that, we have recordings of what actually happened, because it took place in the full light of day with his companions around him. Muhammad would all of a sudden fall silent, his face would grow red and perspire even on cold days, and they said if you were near him you'd hear something like humming around his face. This would last for a few minutes, and then as it left him, Muhammad would recite new verses of the Quran. These states of the revelation would simply descend on him. He could not invite them. He could not avert them. They might happen while he was making a speech, while he was sitting, even while he was riding his camel. He commanded his scribes to record the verses of the Quran he recited... Stylistically the revelations are very different from Muhammad's own recorded words – as different as the great passages of Shakespeare compared with the popular press. 1

These verses were written down on parchment and clay and even on the bones from the shoulder blades of camels. Many people accused Mohammed of plagiarism, which is understandable in that many of his stories and their characters are the same as ones in the Torah and the Christian Bible. But for Muslims this is proof of authenticity and continuity rather than imitation. It's said that the Quran represents the “pinnacle of literary beauty and excellence in the Arabic Language.”

Muslims point to Mohammed's humble background to prove that he could not be the author. Even during his lifetime there were accusations that he and his companions wrote the Quran. However, in the Quran itself there is a challenge to any one or any group to write a passage as beautiful as the ones in the Quran. So far in fourteen hundred years, we are told that no one has been able to come up with even one line that compares in beauty and style. It is thought by Muslims that the Quran is the only living miracle. Today no other miracle of any of the prophets still exists.

Karen Armstrong in her book, *The History of God* writes:

...early biographers of Muhammad constantly describe the wonder and shock felt by the Arabs when they heard the Quran for the first time. Many were converted on the spot, believing that God alone could account for the extraordinary beauty of the language. 2

...It is as though Muhammad had created an entirely new literary form... Without [this] it is extremely unlikely that Islam would have taken root. We have seen that it took the ancient Israelites seven hundred years to break with their old allegiances and accept monotheism, but Muhammad managed to help the Arabs achieve this difficult transition in a mere twenty-three years. Muhammad as poet and prophet and the Quran as text and theophany are surely an unusually striking instance of the deep congruence that exists between art and religion. 3

The Quran was compiled over twenty-three years as Mohammed received the revelations in the seventh century in the full light of history. He memorized the text and others copied it down and memorized it as well. Twenty years after Mohammed's death, his relative 'Uthman found one authentic version and had all other versions destroyed. He had copies of this “original” version sent to all of the Capitols of the Islamic

world. Two of these copies still exist in the world today. One is in Istanbul. Unlike other religious books, its original language is a living language spoken by millions of people today.

Scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr tells us that:

“For Muslims, everything about the Quran is sacred – its sound, the very words of the Arabic language chosen by God to express His message, the letters in which it is written, and even the parchment and paper that constitutes the physical aspect of the sacred text. Muslims carry the Quran with full awareness of its sacred reality and usually do not touch it unless they have made their ablutions and are ritually clean. They kiss it and pass under it when going on a journey, and many carry small copies of it with them at all times for protection. The Quran is that central sacred presence which determines all aspects of Muslim life and the source and fountainhead of all that can be authentically called Islamic.” 4

So this season the celebration of Ramadan and the observance of Advent come together. In each tradition there's a story about the angel Gabriel announcing the arrival of the Word of God. In each tradition there's a person of humble origin who becomes the vehicle for God's entrance into the world. In each tradition, God is depicted like a distant monarch who is external to the world. In each tradition, God is also depicted entering the world only in one very specific way at one very specific time, in a particular culture with a particular language.

For decades, many Unitarian Universalists and other liberal religious people have rejected such a dualistic notion of reality in which a transcendent God who is external to the world comes to be a part of the world only in one form and at only one time. Sally McFague is a Professor of Theology at Vanderbilt University. In her book *The Body of God* she asks us to imagine if the “Word made Flesh” was not limited to the idea of Jesus of Nazareth or for that matter, the Quran. What if it referred to the body of the universe? What if the many and varied bodies of our own cosmos were the visible signs of the invisible God?

She does not try to imply that the cosmos is the sum total of God's grandeur (although others have made that case). McFague sees the universe as the Logos, it is God made flesh as a mediating factor to help us understand God and our world. She writes,

We might begin to realize the extraordinariness of the ordinary. We would begin to delight in creation, not as the work of an external deity, but as a sacrament of the living God. ... [in this way we might realize that] we live and move and have our being in God. ..it does not occur only at one place, but everywhere and not just in one form but in an infinite myriad of forms. 5

She adds that: “If God is physical, then the aesthetic and the ethical unite: praising God in and through the beauty of the bodies entails caring for the most basic needs of all bodies on the planet.” 6 The notion of the cosmos as the Body of God that McFague offers is not idolatry because she is not confusing the cosmos with God. She is suggesting that it is the place “where God is present to us.” For one thing, if all bodies (from heavenly bodies to human bodies) make up the body of God, then we get away from the male notion of God as father and Jesus or the Quran as the singular expression of God on earth.

The ethic that would result would be egalitarian and non-hierarchical. The concepts of God in both Christianity and Islam are by their very nature hierarchical and have tended towards the domination and maltreatment of women, the earth, and others. At this time when billions of people around the world are celebrating the announcement of the Word of God coming to earth in very specific ways... I stand before you to say that revelation is not over! It did not happen only once, thousand or more years ago in another time, and culture and language. In the words of the Unitarian minister Marilyn Sewell: “The Holy is always bursting forth in startling ways in all our lives, and it's for us to prepare for the birth, to expect the unexpected, to be the instrument, to make room for the Holy.” In this hectic holiday season, may each of us

make room in our lives for the Holy to enter. And in so doing, may peace be upon you and yours and all of creation.

Amen.

1 Dr. Abdel-Haleem of London University in: *The Pillars of Islam: An Introduction to the Islamic Faith*, Francels Gumley and Brain Redhead, BBC Books, London 1990.

2 Armstrong, Karen, *A History of God*, Knopf, New York 1993. (Pg. 145).

3 Armstrong. (Pg. 143).

4 Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, "Islam" in: *Our Religions*. Harper San Francisco 1993 (pg. 448).

5 McFague, Sally, *The Body of God*. Fortress Press, Minneapolis 1993. (pg. 132).

6 McFague. (pg. 132-133).