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Lecture 2: The Fragrance of Islam

Islam and Christianity have had a mottled history of confrontation. They are sister faiths having roots in Middle Eastern monotheism and still have a great deal in common. Yet they have been pitted against each other throughout the history of Islam since the appearance of the prophet Muhammad (upon whom be peace) in the beginning of the eighth century CE.

The two faiths have been associated with opposing cultural, social and political systems for over fourteen hundred years, and yet Muslims and Christians have had enormous influences one on the other.

Although Islam can be more truthfully said to have been spread by the caravan than by the sword, neither faith has been a stranger to violence. Yet the word Islam comes from the same root as peace. Surely anyone claiming to be a Muslim who does not foster peace is making a false claim.

Much has been made of violent acts in recent times, but it should be remembered that all of these are in the context of quarrels among wealthy oil families, both Western and Middle Eastern. At times they are able to agree, despite their differences of religion, and when they do not, religion is only a pretext.

Christianity and Islam share a belief in a figure known to the former as antichrist and to the latter as dajjal. In Islamic belief, this figure has only one eye. Those who have only one eye, an eye for oil, and no eye for social justice, morality and ethics other than to appeal to them as a pretext for their own agenda, surely betray both Islam and Christianity.

The incident of the woman anointing the feet of Jesus (as) with fine perfume brings to mind a certain tradition often quoted by orientalist. It is said that the Prophet (as) once said that he had loved women, and that he had loved sweet odors, but that the solace of his soul had been prayer.

It is my purpose to open a few of the perfume bottles of Islam from the Christian Scriptures themselves, so that the Christian can enjoy both the savour of Christ who accepted the sinful woman and her gift as well as the faith of the last of the prophets. At the same time, it should be remembered that Islam is not based on the Bible, but on the holy Qur'an and the traditions of the prophet and his family (as).

Tawheed or the Unity of God

“Say, He, God, is one (alone). God, the needless, He does not beget nor is He begotten, and there is none like Him, no not one.” Qur’an 112. This text is used by millions of Muslims daily as a part of their prayers. It expresses the first and foremost principle of Islam, the unity and uniqueness of God. In this matter, Islam contrasts with Christianity, which acknowledges a trinity, or one god in three persons.

We find the Christian Scriptures wholly agreeing with this basic Islamic principle of faith. In Deuteronomy 32:39 we find God Himself speaking “See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god with me.” In his prayer Nehemiah (9:6) confessed “Thou, even thou, art Lord alone, thou hast made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth, and all things that are therein, the seas, and all that is therein, and thou preservest them all; and the host of heaven worshippeth thee.”

Jesus agrees that this is the first principle of faith when he says in Mark 12:29 “The first of all the commandments is Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord.” St. Paul, apostle beloved of Christians says in 1 Corinthians 8:6 “But to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things.”

The Justice of God

The second great principle of Islamic faith is the assurance that God is not arbitrary, but essentially just. The justice of God is expressed in Qur’an 3:17 “God (Himself) witnesses that there is no god but He, and (so do) the angels and those possessed of knowledge, standing firm for justice, (there is) no god but He, the Mighty the Wise.”

The same great attribute is mentioned many times in the Bible. In Deuteronomy 32:4 we read “He is the Rock, his work is perfect: for all his ways are judgement: a God of truth and without iniquity, just and right is he.”

Muslims understand that God’s justice is essential and intrinsic. Justice is not a separable attribute, nor even a part of God, but God’s very being. The unity of God implies to the Muslim that God has no limits nor parts. Having no limits, there is no limit to God’s perception and knowledge. Having no parts, God must be impartial. The unity of God implies His intrinsic justice. He has all knowledge of every situation, and being impartial, He is perfectly just.

The Apostleship

The third great principle of Islamic faith is apostleship. This is expressed in the holy Qur’an 10:47. “And for every people (was sent) an apostle; and when came their apostle, the matter between them was decided with equity and they shall not (in the least) be done (any) injustice.” This text of the Qur’an notes that the justice of God requires Him to reveal His will to all humankind.

Therefore He has sent prophets to all nations. Islam requires belief in all true prophets, both the prophet mentioned in the Bible and those mentioned in the Qur'an. Muhammad (as) is the last of the prophets sent by God. Thus Qur'an 33:40 says "Muhammad is not the father of any of your men, but an Apostle of God and the last of the prophets: And God is of all things ever the Knower."

In the Christian Scriptures we find the same principles. In Amos 3:7 it says "Surely the Lord will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets." The question arises whether or not Muhammad (as) is mentioned in the Bible. Many texts might be applied to him, but several mention him by name. One of the most important of these is Psalm 106:24, which says "They despise the land of Muhammad (Hebrew Hamda), they believe not his word."

This is a Biblical prophecy indicating that when Muhammad (as) should come, many would find an excuse not to believe in him because of his country of origin. Indeed, we find this to be the case.

Divine Guidance

The fourth great principle of Islamic faith is divine guidance. It is also a logical deduction from the principle of the unity of God. The unity of God implies His justice. God's justice implies verbal revelation of His will, otherwise He would be unjust in holding people accountable for their actions. But verbal revelation, the word of the prophets, implies further guidance, guidance in action, guidance in flesh and blood.

A good illustration of this is an assembly kit. When you buy something that needs to be assembled, there is always a printed instruction manual. Most of us have experienced how confusing such manuals can be. If there is someone who has done it before to show us how, we find the task much easier. The divine guide is one appointed by God to show us how to implement the revealed will of God.

In any practical situation, there are matters about which we might have questions that recourse to the Scriptures is insufficient. Even after reading the Bible and the Qur'an, we are unsure what to do. The role of the divine guide is to show us what to do. The Arabic word for the divine guide is Imam, although this is often used merely to refer to a simple leader of prayer.

The word leader in referring to the divine guide is much more than that, however. The holy Qur'an mentions that God made Abraham (as) not only a prophet, but a leader or Imam for humankind, in Qur'an 2:125 "And remember when his Lord tried Abraham with certain words then he fulfilled them: He said, Truly I make you an Imam for humankind..."

The principle of divine guidance runs like a golden thread throughout the Christian Scriptures as well. The necessity of divine guidance is expressed very neatly in the story of Philip in Acts 8:30-31 "Philip ran thither to him, and heard him read the prophet Esaias, and said, Understandest thou what thou readest? And he said, How can I, except some man should guide me?"

The statement of the Ethiopian shows clearly that the writings of the prophets are not enough. There must also be a divine guide to implement them in practice.

The leadership of Abraham (as) continued through his descendants, finally coming to the holy Prophet Muhammad (as), who passed it on to his cousin and son-in-law Ali ibn abi Taleb (as). This was done publicly after the event of the Prophet's (as) last pilgrimage to Mecca. The greater portion of the Muslims at the time were witnesses to the fact.

At that time Ali (as) was appointed, and the appointment has gone down to eleven of his descendants, the last of which is believed to be still living and ruling. The Bible also shows a number of series of twelve leaders, such as the twelve patriarchal reigns in Genesis, the twelve sons of Ishmael, the twelve sons of Jacob, the twelve judges of Israel, the twelve righteous kings of Judah, and the twelve disciples of Christ (as).

The Day of Judgement

The differences between the Islamic and Christian concepts of the Day of Judgement are difficult to find, and hardly to be understood by any but the specialist, so close are the two faiths in this regard.

This is the final great principle of Islamic faith, and it is mentioned in many passages of the holy Qur'an, such as 99:6-8 "On that day people will come out (from their graves) in (scattered) groups, to be shown their own deeds. Then he who has done an atom-weight of good shall see it. And he who has done an atom-weight of evil shall see it." Jesus makes the same point in Matthew 12:36 "But I say unto you, That ever idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgement."

Thus there are five great principles of Islam. The unity of God implies His justice. The justice of God implies the necessity of revelation. Revelation implies someone to implement it. Finally, human beings are held responsible for how they relate to the revelation of God's will. Besides the five great principles of Islamic faith there are many practices that logically proceed from them, as well as being expressed in revelation.

Ten of these are traditionally considered to be basic. These are daily prayer in prostration, fasting during the month of Ramadhan, pilgrimage to the house of God in Mecca, charity taken from one's assets, charity taken from one's profits, jihad or endeavour in the way of God, enjoining good, opposing evil, respect for godly people, and avoidance of wicked people.

Prayer in Prostration

Muslims are known particularly for their daily prayer in prostration. Therefore the holy Qur'an (6: 163) states "Say: Truly my prayer and my sacrifice, my life and my death, (are all only) for God, the Lord of the worlds." Actually Islamic prayer is better described in the Bible than in the Qur'an. Every time and gesture of Islamic prayer in prostration is mentioned in the Bible. Nearly every common phrase of the

prayer is to be found in the Psalms of David.

It is one of the incongruities of reality that Muslims follow the Bible so closely in their prayer, while Christians and Jews have developed extra-Biblical practices of prayer. Yet the latter claim to base their practice on the Bible, whereas Muslims do not. Muslims base their practice on the Qur'an and tradition. If anything can be said about humankind, it is that we are irrational.

The example of Jesus praying in prostration is mentioned in Matthew 26:39 "And he went a little farther, and fell on his face, and prayed." Prayer at specific times in the day is also mentioned in the Bible, Psalm 32:6 "For this shall every one that is godly pray unto thee in a time when thou mayest be found." Also Psalm 69: 13 "But as for me, my prayer is unto thee, O Lord, in an acceptable time."

The cry "Allahu akbar" is mentioned as belonging to prayer in Psalm 35:27; 18:5,6; 30:8; 34:3; and 55: 16. Standing, bowing, kneeling, and prostrating are all gestures of prayer in the Psalms. Prayer towards the house of God is commended in Psalm 5:7 "But as for me, I will come into thy house in the multitude of thy mercy; and in thy fear will I worship toward thy holy temple."

Islamic prayer brings the individual into paradise itself. When I began dialogue with Muslims, one of the first things I was told was "If you only knew how sweet is prayer in prostration, you would fight us to get it." That is entirely true.

Fasting

In Qur'an 2:183 it says "O you who believe! Fasting has been ordained to you as it was ordained to those before you so that you might guard yourself (against evil)." Interestingly enough, fasting is not mentioned in the books of Moses (as) except for the forty day fast of Moses (as) himself. A similar fast was performed by Jesus (as) upon receiving the Gospel, and by Muhammad (as) as well.

Yet we know that fasting in the ninth lunar month, the month of Ramadhan, was practiced from early times, as the Qur'an indicates. Evidence of this is in Jeremiah 36:9 "And it came to pass in the fifth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah king of Judah, in the ninth month, that they proclaimed a fast before the Lord to all the people in Jerusalem, and to all the people that came from the cities of Judah unto Jerusalem." We know that this was a common religious practice from the fact that this king was not a righteous one. He did not proclaim anything good unless it was an established practice.

The reason for fasting is to help us to guard ourselves against evil. That is, it fosters doing the right thing. It makes us stop to reevaluate our lives and redetermine to act in ethical, moral, and just ways.

Pilgrimage

It is incumbent on every Muslim to go to the house of God in Mecca at least once in a lifetime if possible. It says in the Qur'an (22:27) "And proclaim to the people the Pilgrimage! They will come to you on foot

and on lean camel, coming from every remote (high) way.”

Pilgrimage to Jerusalem is mentioned often in the Gospel in relation to Jesus (as). But Jesus (as) prophesies in John 4:21 that the time will come “when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father.” Muslims believe that the Pilgrimage to Mecca refers back to the experience of Abraham, who rebuilt the house of God there, making it a holy place down to our days as well.

At the beginning of his ministry, Muhammad (as) continued the direction of prayer towards Jerusalem. It was only later that the prophecy of Jesus (as) was fulfilled, and Mecca rather than Mount Gerazim or Jerusalem, became the proper place of pilgrimage and the right direction of prayer.

Charity

Charity is enjoined on Muslims in the holy Qur’an 2:43 “Establish the prayer and give away the poor—rate and bow down (praying).” In the sermon on the mount Jesus (as) begins Matthew six with four verses enjoining charity. Charity has always been a primary Christian duty, and in this the two faiths of Islam and Christianity are very much agreed. In some sense we can take Matthew six as a summary of the teaching of Jesus (as). In Matthew five Jesus merely establishes his adherence to the law.

In Matthew seven he describes the day of judgement. The meat of this sandwich is Matthew six, and the first principle of Matthew six is alms in charity. It is interesting to note that the rest of the chapter deals with prayer in prostration, fasting, and, in the last half, probably with pilgrimage.

Holy War

There are four kinds of holy war in Islam: striving with the self, striving with one’s wealth, striving with knowledge, and striving with the sword. These may well be in order of importance, the last being the least. Therefore the Qur’an (9:41) says “Go forth (with) light and heavy equipment and strive in the way of God with your property and your selves, this is better for you, if you knew (it).”

Thus the principle of Islam is to struggle or strive, first of all with oneself to maintain right, then with one’s wealth, intellectual capacity, and arms. Islam is not a pacifist religion, but military action is carefully circumscribed. Unfortunately most of the military action down through history has not been justifiable on Islamic principles.

War to enhance territory and wealth is not justifiable, and this is the general situation. “Jihad should be exclusively in the way of the Lord and never for any territorial ambition.” (Introduction to the Holy Qur’an, S. V. Mir Ahmed Ali, page 123a).

Recent research suggests that Jesus (as) was not the sweet and effeminate saviour that many believe him to be, but a Zealot, establishing himself as the divinely appointed leader in the face of the Roman

occupation. Whether or not that be the case, Christianity was spread throughout Europe by the sword and later throughout the world through colonial occupation.

The greatest holocaust, insofar as the numbers of victims is concerned, was not the Jews in Europe in the 1940s, but the Indians in Mexico, of whom more than twice as many died in only half the time, during the first few years of Christian conquest, many of them being baptized against their will before being killed.

Islam is the faith of peace, and Muslims should invite Christians to join them in walking the middle line, not declining war when it is necessary to defend peace and justice, but fearlessly condemning the terrorism, violence, and oppression that is so visible in the present world as a result of politico-economic conflict.

Enjoining the good and opposing evil

This practice of Islam is expressed in the holy Qur'an 3:109 "You are the best group that has been brought forth for mankind: you enjoin goodness and you forbid evil, and you believe in God; and if the people of the Book had (also) believed (similarly) it had surely been better for them; of them (only some) are believers and most of them are perverse."

The same principle is reiterated in Psalm 45:7 "Thou lovest righteousness, and hatest wickedness: therefore God, thy God, hath anointed thee with the oil of gladness above thy fellows." It is said that all are responsible to foster good and oppose evil to the best of their ability, if not by actions, then by words, and if not by words, then by thoughts. According to Islam good is whatever is in accordance with revealed divine law, and evil is anything that opposes it.

Respect for the godly and avoidance of the wicked

This Islamic principle is mentioned in the holy Qur'an 42:23 "That is of which God gives the glad tidings to His servants who believe and do good deeds; Say: I demand not of you any recompense for it (the toils of apostleship) but the love of (my) relatives, and whosoever earns good, We increase for him good therein, truly God is Oft-Forgiving the most Grateful (One)."

Attachment to the godly refers to two groups: firstly to the worthy descendants of the Prophet (as) and specifically the divinely appointed guides, and secondly to those who earn good, or by their behaviour show their attachment to the will of God.

The same principle is found in the Bible as well, for example, in Malachi 3:18 "Then shall ye return, and discern between the righteous and the wicked, between him that serveth God and him that serveth him not." The idea is to put a distinction between those who do right and those who do not.

This is the basic criterion of distinguishing between people, and it implies that other criteria are wrong.

Thus we should not distinguish between people on the basis of their wealth, race, appearance, or mental or physical capacity. We should respect people uniquely for the degree to which they show evidence of adherence to divine law and foster it. Attraction to celebrities is thus un-Islamic.

Down through the centuries Islam has been taught with the fingers of the hand, to make things simple and easy to remember. There are five basic principles and ten basic practices. These constitute the basics of Islam, but there are many other matters of grave importance, such as the many practices of purity, modesty, and justice. But these are all implicit in the one great principle that God is one.

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