

Good News

...And give good news to those who do good (to others) - HQ22:37

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What Jesus Can Teach Today's Muslims

By Mustafa Akyol with commentary by the editor of *The Light and Islamic Review*)

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*[Muslims believe in all the prophets of God and derive benefits from their original unadulterated teachings. This article, an insightful take on the role and significance of Jesus for Muslims today, is being reproduced from a **New York Times Op-Ed on February 13, 2017**. The author, Mustafa Akyol, a Turkish born academic, published several books, most recently "The Islamic Jesus: How the King of the Jews Became a Prophet of the Muslims." Following his opinion is a comment at the end of this article by the Editor of *The Light and Islamic Review* that was given in response to an inquiry about the points raised in Mr. Akyol's contribution.]*

What is the trouble with Islam? Why are there so many angry Muslims in

the world who loathe the West? Why do self-declared Islamic states impose harsh laws that oppress minorities, women and "apostates"? Why are there terrorists who kill in the name of Allah? Many in the West have been asking these kinds of questions for decades. Answers have varied from claiming that there is no problem within Islam today, which is too defensive, to asserting that Islam itself is a huge problem for the world, which is unfair and prejudiced. Luckily, more informed observers offered more objective answers: The Islamic civilization, once the world's most enlightened, has lately been going through an acute crisis with severe consequences.

One of the prominent minds of the past century, the British historian Arnold Toynbee, also pondered the crisis of Islam, in a largely forgotten 1948 essay, "Islam, the West, and the Future." The Islamic world has been in a crisis since the 19th century, Toynbee wrote, because it was outperformed, defeated and even

besieged by Western powers. Islam, a religion that has always been proud of its earthly success, was now “facing the West with her back to the wall,” causing stress, anger and turmoil among Muslims. Toynbee, with the insight of a great historian, not only analyzed the crisis of Islam but also compared it with an older crisis of an older religion: the plight of the Jews in the face of Roman domination in the first century B.C.

The Jews, too, were a monotheistic people with a high opinion of themselves, but they were defeated, conquered and culturally challenged by a foreign empire. This ordeal, Toynbee explained, bred two extreme reactions: One was “Herodianism,”¹ which meant collaborating with Rome and imitating its ways. The other was “Zealotism,” which meant militancy against Rome and a strict adherence to Jewish law.

Modern-day Muslims, too, Toynbee argued, are haunted by the endless struggles between their own Herodians who imitate the West and their own Zealots who embody “archaism evoked by foreign pressure.” He pointed to modern Turkey’s founder,

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, as an “arch-Herodian” and the “Central Arabian Wahhabis” as arch-Zealots. He predicted that the Zealots would ultimately be defeated because they lack the sophistication to use modern technology. Had he lived today — and seen, for example, how effectively the Islamic State (ISIS) uses the internet — he might revisit that optimism.

Over the decades, a few Muslim intellectuals have taken note of Toynbee’s analogy and argued that Muslims should find a third way, something between Herodianism and Zealotism. It’s a reasonable argument, but it neglects a lot of history. These would-be Muslim reformers, like Toynbee, ignore that the first-century Jewish world wasn’t limited to the Herodian-Zealot dichotomy. There were other Jewish parties with intellectual, mystical or conservative leanings. There was also a peculiar rabbi from Nazareth: Jesus.

Jesus claimed to be the very savior — the Messiah — that his people awaited. But unlike other Messiah claimants of his time, he did not unleash an armed rebellion against Rome. He did not bow down to Rome, either. He put his attention to something else: reviving the faith and reforming the religion of his people. In

¹ Herod, a Jew, was appointed as king of the Jews by the Romans. He is described as a ‘Roman client’ king of Judea i.e. he ruled on behalf of Rome. (Wikipedia) – Ed.

particular, he called on his fellow Jews to focus on their religion's moral principles, rather than obsessing with the minute details of religious law. He criticized the legalist Pharisees, for example, for "tithing mint and rue and every herb," but neglecting "justice and the love of God." Christians, of course, know this story well. Yet Muslims need to take notice, too. Because they are going through a crisis very similar to the one Jesus addressed: While being pressed by a foreign civilization, they are also troubled by their own fanatics who see the light only in imposing a rigid law, *Shariah*, and fighting for theocratic rule. Muslims need a creative third way, which will be true to their faith but also free from the burdens of the past tradition and the current political context.

Would it be a totally new idea for Muslims to learn from Jesus? To some extent, yes. While Muslims respect and love Jesus — and his immaculate mother, Mary — because the Quran wholeheartedly praises them, most have never thought about the historical mission of Jesus, the essence of his teaching and how it may relate to their own reality.

A notable exception was Muhammad Abduh, one of the pioneers of Islamic modernism in the late 19th century.

Abduh, a pious Egyptian scholar, thought that the Muslim world had **lost the tolerance and openness of early Islam** and had been suffocated by a dogmatic, rigid tradition.² When he read the New Testament, he was impressed. As a Muslim, he did not agree with the Christian theology about Jesus, but he still was moved by Jesus's teachings, which were relevant to a problem Abduh observed in the Muslim world. It was the problem of **"being frozen on the literal meaning of the law,"** he wrote, and thus failing to "understanding the purpose of the law."³

Some other Muslim scholars noted the same problems as Abduh. But no Muslim religious leader has yet stressed the crucial gap between divine purposes and dry legalism as powerfully as Jesus did. Jesus showed that sacrificing the spirit of religion to

² Muhammad Abduh argued that Muslims could not simply rely on the interpretations of texts provided by medieval clerics; they needed to use reason to keep up with changing times. He said that in Islam man was not created to be led by a bridle, man was given intelligence so that he could be guided by knowledge. According to Abduh, a teacher's role was to direct men towards study. He believed that Islam encouraged men to detach from the world of their ancestors and that Islam reproved the slavish imitation of tradition – (Wikipedia – Ed.)

³ This is true for Christians too as Dan Brown, author of the *Da Vinci Code* in a recent BBC interview warned, that the dangers religion faced was reading "metaphors as fact". This was his main objection with Christianity – Ed.

literalism leads to horrors, like the stoning of innocent women by bigoted men — as it still happens in some Muslim countries today. He also taught that obsession with outward expressions of piety can nurture a culture of hypocrisy — as is the case in some Muslim communities today.⁴ Jesus even defined humanism as a higher value than legalism, famously declaring, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” Can we Muslims also reason, “The *Shariah* is made for man, not man for the *Shariah*”? Or, like Jesus, can we also suggest that the Kingdom of God — also called “the Caliphate” — will be established not within any earthly polity⁵, but within our hearts and minds? If Jesus is “a prophet of Islam,” as we Muslims often proudly say, then we should think on these questions. Because Jesus addressed the very problems that haunt us today and established a prophetic wisdom perfectly fit for our times.

Comment on above article by Fazeel Sahu Khan, Editor, *The Light and Islamic Review*:

⁴ Holy Quran makes this point forcefully: ‘So woe to the praying ones, Who are unmindful of their prayers’ – 107:4-5 – Ed.

⁵ Government or State - Ed

The points raised are valid and, to be honest, necessary. There is a report by the Holy Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of God be upon him) wherein he states that in the latter days Muslims will go to their religious leaders to seek assistance in times of great consternation and will find them as apes and swine.⁶ This statement is not only reflective of the depraved moral condition in which many people find their religious leaders today (i.e. devoid of the spiritual foundations of the faith, and focused on ritualistic conduct only), but it is also prophetic of the type of reform attempts made by Muslims in these times (similar to what is discussed in the article). Being an “ape” signifies merely following (or “aping”) others, and being a “swine” signifies being a slave to one’s lower desires (or uncontrollable passions). The alternative (or third) method is based on reform of one’s self (i.e. focusing on the kingdom of God within). Focus on the reform of the individual, is what leads to the reform of a community and eventually the reform of humanity. This is the basis of all faith traditions and the very purpose for religion. And this is actually what is meant by the Quran acknowledging

⁶ *Kanz al-‘Ummal* Vol. 7, H. no. 2013; *Muslim, Ibn Majah and Musnad of Ahmad*

Jesus as the “Messiah” of the Israelite nation – i.e. that he would revive the spirit of the faith. Interestingly, the Lahore Ahmadiyya Movement in Islam is founded on this very principle. The founder of the Movement, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, claimed to be the “*Mujaddid*” (Reviver of the Faith) of the age and taught this very same principle (that it is a time for self-reformation and introspection, and that this is the ‘great struggle’ - *jihad* of the time, not *jihad* of defensive battles). And this is what he meant when he said that he came in the “**spirit of Jesus**” — not that he was actually Jesus (on whom be peace) but that his mission of revival was the same. He explained, “If I had not come in the spirit of Jesus, someone else would have because the time is ripe for the Messiah”. Here is a link to an issue of *The Light and Islamic Review* which includes one of my articles on this topic entitled “The Great Revival Initiative”: muslim.org/light/light14-3.pdf.



We strongly condemn all forms of human right violations; all forms of injustices, and the wanton abuse of the environment. We condemn all forms of aggression especially the ruthless killings of all innocent parties in the name of Religion or State!

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