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# EDITORIAL COMMENT

Fareed Ahmad – UK

## **Freedom of Religion – a right not a wrong**

At a time when there should be a greater effort to promote understanding and respect for different religions it seems that the exact opposite is happening. Certainly across Europe there seems to be a wave of opposition against Muslim women observing their faith by the way they choose to dress in public. Both France and Italy have banned the veil in differing degrees and other European countries are turning a blind eye to similar bans within their countries. In Britain there has been a far reaching debate sparked by the Rt. Hon Mr Jack Straw requesting Muslim women to remove their veils and more recently in November the Dutch Cabinet proposed to seek a ban on all Islamic veils being worn in public.

What is more disturbing about these events is that they are taking place in the heart of

Europe. Whilst Europe presents itself as the leading light on human rights it is fast becoming a model of intolerance, with governments making it acceptable simply to attack a religious belief whilst failing to grasp its true meaning and value.

Even more worrying is the fact that such religious discrimination is in direct contrast to one of the key conventions of the European Union itself. Article Nine of the European Convention on Human Rights clearly states that:

‘Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance.’

It goes on to clarify that the freedom to manifest one's religion is only to be restricted in the interest of 'public safety, for the protection of public order, health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.' It would take a fantastic leap of the imagination to deem the wearing of a veil, or similarly a coat and scarf, as a threat to any of the above. So are such freedoms now under threat? It would certainly appear to be so, although interestingly enough the case of Nadia Eweida, a British Airways employee, who was dismissed from employment for wearing a small Cross on her necklace on the outside of her uniform drew sympathies, rather than criticisms, from Mr Jack Straw and the Church. On the one hand they were critical of the wearing of the veil in public and on the other they vociferously defended the right of people to express their faith by wearing a Cross.

In Ms Eweida's case Jack Straw argued that any ban on her public display of faith was 'wholly

inexplicable'. It seems that some ministers have taken on the role of fashion gurus to determine what level and style of faith can be expressed in public and what cannot. His double standards over these two issues are 'wholly inexplicable'.

But such views over the Islamic veil have not been expressed by politicians alone. The outspoken Anglican Archbishop of York, Dr John Sentamu, who has brought fresh vigour to religious debate in British public life, has also been critical of the veil. He talks of British society and its 'Christian culture and heritage' that acts as a moral compass for this country and on issues such as the veil says that Muslims should not expect British society to be 'recon-figured' to accommodate them. It is odd that he is choosing to rely on social norms to determine what is acceptable rather than taking a more principled stance on the issue.

If we are supposed to follow social norms then why did anyone waste time on the Civil

Rights movement in America, or seek to end apartheid in South Africa? These were periods when being of a particular race was looked down upon and resulted in fear and oppression. Indeed the Archbishops view that the veil ‘renders you less secure because you stick out and it brings unwelcome attention’ could well apply to the African, Asian and West Indian populations of America and Britain at that time, yet it did not mean that everyone should have changed their colour so that they could have fitted in better. Those people were keen to banish social ignorance about racial difference and promote tolerance and mutual respect based on education. Similarly Muslim women today are seeking to banish ignorance about the veil and if such acts are deemed to be a ‘reconfiguring’ of society then it would seem to be a welcome and positive move.

Furthermore if such periods of history were part of the ‘Christian culture and heritage’ then would Dr. Sentamu argue

that it should have remained unchanged and others should have just accepted it at face value? Clearly not and the reason would be that his faith would not accept such discrimination. What this tells us is that social values are dynamic and constantly subject to change but religion must provide a moral and objective counter-balance to keep society in check and to promote morality and equality.

So what does the Christian faith have to say about the veil? Unsurprisingly we note that it is in chime with Islam’s emphasis on modesty and it portrays the covering of the body as a virtuous act. The Bible tells us that:

‘And Rebekah lifted up her eyes, and when she saw Isaac, she lighted off the camel. For she had said unto the servant, What man is this that walketh in the field to meet us? And the servant had said, it is my master: therefore she took a veil and covered herself.’  
(*Genesis: 24: 64-65*)

‘In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel with shamefacedness and sobriety, not with broided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array.’

*(1 Timothy: 9)*

‘But every women that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven.’

*(1 Corinthians 11:5)*

All this clearly shows that the veil and covering the head are righteous acts that should be encouraged. Indeed if there is a Christian cultural heritage to Britain – and Europe for that matter – then the right to wear the veil should be welcomed and promoted by the clergy. That would reflect true courageous leadership, the same leadership that was shown when defending the case of Nadia Eweida – even though wearing the Cross is not a requirement of the Christian faith. On this Dr Sentamu said:

‘For me, the Cross is important because it reminds me that God keeps his promises...Wearing a Cross carries with it not only a symbol of our hopes but also a responsibility to act and to live as Christians...This symbol does not point only upwards but also outwards, it reminds us of our duties not only to God but also to one another.’

*(BBC News 21 November 2006)*

I would expect that the same sentiment is expressed about the veil by Muslim women. The veil is a symbol of modesty, liberty and dignity. It is a reminder of our responsibility to God’s command and it reflects a pure and chaste state of mind, enabling us all to stay on the moral path.

Islam teaches us that there must be freedom of religion – in belief and in practise – for peace in society. This is emphasised to such an extent that the Holy Prophet<sup>(saw)</sup> offered his mosque to

a Christian delegation from Najran to offer their prayers. This alone should be sufficient to demonstrate that Islam defends absolutely the freedom of religion. From the right of Christians to build a place of worship to their right to wear a Cross (in a mosque or anywhere for that matter) Islam permits no barriers to the observance of faith. Indeed the same rights have been granted to all faiths, enabling them to be practised without hindrance. It is worth noting here that some Muslim countries too do not conform to this noble principle and this is clearly wrong and not in line with the teachings of Islam.

This complete freedom in matters of faith is the spirit of religious freedom in Islam that was given to the world over 1400 years ago and the same spirit and teaching that is so relevant even to this day.

**References:**

- *The Daily Mail*, 13 Nov. 2006,
- *The Daily Telegraph*, 15 Nov. 2006,
- BBC News, 21 Nov.2006

References to the Holy Qur'an item count 'Bismillah...' (In the Name of Allah...) as the first verse of each Chapter. In some non-standard texts, this is not counted and should the reader refer to such texts, the verse quoted in *The Review of Religions* will be found at one verse less than the number quoted.

In this journal, for the ease of non-Muslim readers, '(saw)' or 'saw' after the words, 'Holy Prophet', or the name 'Muhammad', are used. They stand for '*Sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam*' meaning 'Peace and blessings of Allah be upon him'. Likewise, the letters '(as)' or 'as' after the name of all other prophets is an abbreviation meaning 'Peace be upon him' derived from '*Alaihis salatu wassalam*' which are words that a Muslim utters out of respect whenever he or she comes across that name. The abbreviation 'ra' or (ra) stands for '*Radhiallahu Ta'ala anhu* and is used for Companions of a Prophet, meaning Allah be pleased with him or her (when followed by the relevant Arabic pronoun). Finally, 'ru' or (ru) for '*Rahemahullahu Ta'ala* means the Mercy of Allah the Exalted be upon him.

In keeping with current universal practice, local transliterations of names of places are preferred to their anglicised versions, e.g. Makkah instead of Mecca, etc.

# ESSENCE OF ISLAM:

## *Guidance for the Righteous – Part 14*

This series sets out, in the words of the Promised Messiah<sup>(as)</sup>, Hadhrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, a summary of his exposition of four outstanding topics: ISLAM; ALLAH, THE EXALTED; THE HOLY PROPHET<sup>(sa)</sup> and THE HOLY QUR'AN. The original compilation, in Urdu, from which these extracts have been translated into English, was collated with great care and diligence by Syed Daud Ahmad Sahib, Allah have mercy on him and reward him graciously for his great labour of love. Amin. The English rendering is by the late Sir Muhammad Zafrullah Khan, may Allah be pleased with him, and is quoted from *The Essence of Islam*, Volume 1. All references throughout, unless otherwise specifically mentioned, are from the Holy Qur'an.

### **Guidance for the Righteous**

Some Brahmū Samajists object that if perfect understanding depends upon the Qur'an, then why did God not publish it in all countries and in all places of population, ancient and modern, and why did He deprive millions of His creatures of His perfect understanding and of true doctrine?

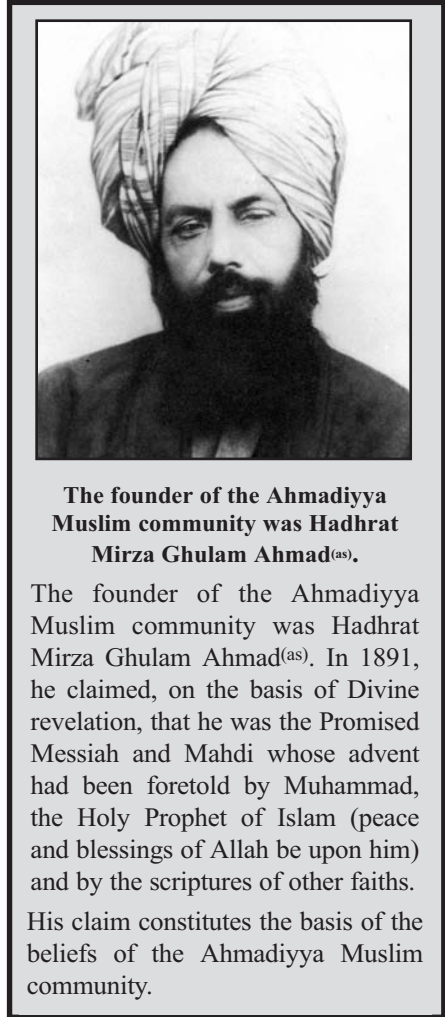
The reply is that this objection derives from shortsightedness.....If the light of the sun does not reach certain dark places or if some people shut their eyes

like an owl on beholding the sun, would this mean that the sun has not been created by God? If the rain does not fall on some dry land or a saline area does not get the benefit of it, then would it follow that rain is the work of man? To meet such doubts God Almighty has made it clear in the Holy Qur'an that the guidance of Divine revelation is not meant for every temperament, but is meant for those pure temperaments that possess the quality of righteousness. It is only such people who take advantage of the perfect guidance of revelation and

are benefited by it. Divine revelation reaches them in any case. In this context, we draw attention to the following verses of the Holy Qur'an:

*I am Allah, the All-Knowing,  
This is a perfect Book; there is  
no doubt in it; it is a guidance  
for the righteous,  
Who believe in the unseen and  
observe Prayer; and spend out  
of what We have provided for  
them;  
And who believe in that which  
has been revealed to thee, and  
that which was revealed before  
thee, and they have firm faith  
in what is yet to come,  
It is they who follow the  
guidance of their Lord and it is  
they who shall prosper.  
Those who have disbelieved -  
it being equal to them whether  
thou warn them or warn them  
not-they will not believe,  
Allah has set a seal on their  
hearts and their ears, and over  
their eyes is a covering; and  
for them is a great punishment  
(Ch.2:Vs.2-8)*

and again:



**The founder of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community was Hadhrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad<sup>(as)</sup>.**

The founder of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community was Hadhrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad<sup>(as)</sup>. In 1891, he claimed, on the basis of Divine revelation, that he was the Promised Messiah and Mahdi whose advent had been foretold by Muhammad, the Holy Prophet of Islam (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) and by the scriptures of other faiths. His claim constitutes the basis of the beliefs of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community.

*He it is Who has raised among  
the unlettered people a  
Messenger from among  
themselves who recites unto  
them His Signs, and purifies  
them, and teaches them the*



*Book and wisdom, although they had been, before, in manifest misguidance.*

*And among others from among them who have not yet joined them. He is the Mighty, the Wise.*

*That is Allah's Grace; He bestows it on whom He pleases; and Allah is the Master of immense grace.*

(Ch.62:Vs.3-5)

One should ponder over the first verse, namely:

*I am Allah, the All-Knowing, This is a perfect Book; there is no doubt in it; it is a guidance for the righteous,*

(Ch.2:Vs.2-3)

It will be observed how well, beautifully and succinctly God Almighty has furnished the answer to the objection raised. First reference is made to the Author of the Holy Qur'an and His Grandeur and Majesty are indicated. It is said:

*I am Allah, the All-Knowing.*

(Ch.2:V.2)

I am Allah, Who knows best. That is to say, I, Who am All-Knowing and All-Wise, Whose knowledge is not matched by the knowledge of anyone else, am revealing this Book.

Then the greatness of the Holy Qur'an is referred to and it is said:

*This is a perfect Book*

(Ch.2:V.3)

This is that Book: that is to say, a grand and sublime Book which derives from Divine knowledge. It is established with regard to it that its source and spring is the Eternal Being of the All-Wise.

By using the word 'that', which denotes distance, God Almighty has indicated that this Book derives from the knowledge of that Being with high attributes, Who is Matchless and Peerless and Whose perfect knowledge and profound mysteries are very far from the limits of human sight.

Then the praiseworthiness of its form and structure are described by saying:

*There is no doubt in it.*  
(Ch.2:V.3)

The body of the Qur'an is so well reasoned that there is no room left in it for any kind of doubt; meaning that, unlike other books, it is not a mere tale or story, but is comprehensive of conclusive arguments and reasoning, and sets forth clear proofs of its objects and purposes, and is in itself a **miracle** which operates like a sharp sword for the removal of doubts and suspicions, and does not leave the matter of the recognition of God at the conjectural stage of **He should be**, but carries the matter to the certainty of, **He is**.

Despite the grandeur of these purposes which are greatly concerned with effect and reform, it proceeds to define the **fourth purpose which is its ultimate object**, which is the provision of guidance for the righteous. It announces that it is:

*It is a guidance for the righteous.*  
(Ch.2:V.3)

This Book has been revealed for

the guidance of those who, on account of their pure interiors, sane reason, firm intelligence, eagerness for search of truth, right motives, would, in the end, arrive at a high degree of faith and recognition of God and perfect righteousness.

In other words, those about whom God knows that their nature is suited to this guidance and they can make progress in true insights, will in the end be guided by this Book; and this Book would reach them and God would enable them to follow the right path before their death. Thus, God Almighty has clearly stated that those who in the knowledge of God are worthy of being guided and possess the quality of righteousness by their nature will surely be guided through the Holy Qur'an.

The succeeding verses set forth the details and pronounce that: Those who in the knowledge of God are likely to believe will all gradually believe, and only those will be left outside concerning whom God knows that they will not embrace Islam and, whether they are warned or not, they will not

believe, or will not arrive at the perfect stage of righteousness and understanding (Ch.2:Vs.4-8).

Thus in these verses God Almighty has made it clear that only those can derive benefit from the guidance of the Qur'an who are righteous and whose true nature is not overcome by any darkness of their ego. . . .

If it is asked what about the salvation of those who have had no access to a revealed Book, the answer is that if they are wholly wild and are deprived of human intelligence, they will not be called to account in any way. They are in the category of the insane. But those who possess some degree of intelligence, will be called to account according to the degree of their intelligence.

*(Barahin-e-Ahmadiyya, Ruhani Khazain, Vol. 1 pp. 198-203, footnote 11)*

The seed of the Unity of God which the Holy Qur'an has sown in Arabia, Persia, Egypt, Syria, India, China, Afghanistan, Kashmir and other regions, and the manner in which it has rooted

out idol worship and the worship of creatures from most places, is a matter which is not matched in any age. As a contrast, when we look at the Vedas, we find that they were not able to reform even Aryavart itself.

*(Chashma-e-Ma'rifat, Ruhani Khazain, Vol. 23, p.77)*

Be alert all the time and do not take a single step contrary to Divine teaching and the guidance of the Qur'an. I tell you truly that anyone who evades the least one of the 700 commandments of the Qur'an, shuts upon himself the door of salvation. The ways of true and perfect salvation have been opened by the Qur'an and all the rest is its reflection. Therefore, study the Qur'an with care and hold it very dear with a love that you have not for anything else. As God has said to me:

*'All good is contained in the Qur'an'*

This is wholly true. Those people are to be pitied who prefer anything else to it. The fountainhead of all your prosperity and salvation is the Holy Qur'an.

There is no religious need of yours which is not filled by the Qur'an.

On the Day of Judgement, the Qur'an will confirm or deny your faith. There is no other book under heaven beside the Qur'an which can furnish you with salvation. God has been very Beneficent towards you that He has bestowed a Book like the Qur'an upon you. I tell you truly that if the Book that is recited to you had been recited to the Christians, they would not have perished. If this bounty of guidance which has been bestowed upon you had been bestowed upon the Jews in place of the Torah, some of their sects would not have denied the Day of Judgement. Then value this favour that has been bestowed upon you. It is a very dear favour; it is great wealth. If the Qur'an had not been revealed, the whole world would have been left like a dirty lump of flesh. The Qur'an is the Book in contrast with which all other guidance amounts to nothing. (*Kashti Nuh, Ruhani Khazain, Vol.19, pp. 26-27*)

In addition to all the excellences and beauties of style and idiom, the Holy Qur'an is the compendium of

wisdom and knowledge, and possesses such a spiritual effect that following it truly a person achieves prosperity, inner light and expansion of mind, and becomes accepted of God and worthy of being addressed by Him. The Holy Qur'an creates in its follower those lights and hidden graces and provides him with such certain supports that are not found in others. He receives from God that delicious and comforting word in consequence of which he realises more and more every moment that by the true following of the Holy Qur'an and true obedience to the Holy Prophet<sup>(saw)</sup> he has arrived at a stage which is special for those whom God loves, and that he has been bestowed such Divine pleasure and kindness, which had been bestowed upon all those of perfect faith who have passed on before him. He perceives not only in words, but as actual fact, a pure spring of all these loves flowing through his heart and observes such a condition of relationship with God in his open breast which he cannot describe in words or by means of any illustration. He observes Divine lights descending like rain upon his soul.

Those lights cast their reflection upon him sometimes in the form of the disclosure of hidden matters, sometimes in the form of knowledge and insights, and at other times in the form of high moral qualities. These effects of the Holy Qur'an have been continuous. Ever since the sun of truth appeared in the world in the blessed person of the Holy Prophet(saw), thousands of people who possessed the capacity and the ability have arrived and continue to arrive at those high stages by following the Divine Word and obeying the Holy Prophet(saw) that we have mentioned above. God Almighty bestows continuously such favours and exaltations on them and manifests such support and bounties for them, that those with clear eyesight recognise that they are accepted of God and that they are under a grand shadow of Divine kindness and enjoy a majestic Divine grace. Observers can see clearly that they are honoured with extraordinary bounties, distinguished with wonderful miracles, scented with the perfume of the love of God, and are invested with the pride of being accepted of God. The light of the All-Powerful so fills their

company, their attention, their resolve, their prayer, their eyesight, their moral qualities, their way of living, their pleasure and their anger, their liking and their dislike, their movement and their rest, their speech and their silence, and their exterior and their interior as a precious perfume fills a phial of transparent glass.

Those things are acquired through the grace of their companionship, attention and love, which cannot be acquired through the severest discipline. By entertaining goodwill and good faith for them, faith takes on another aspect, a new strength is gained for the display of good moral qualities, self-will and the inclination towards disobedience begin to decline, and a satisfaction and a sweetness is gained. According to one's capacity and the degree of one's relationship, faith surges up, and affection and fondness manifest themselves, and delight in the remembrance of God increases.

By keeping company with them over a long period, one is brought to confess that in their strength of faith, and their moral conditions,

their renunciation of the world, inclination towards God, love for God and kindness towards His creatures, and in their fidelity and steadfastness, they occupy such a high place as has no equal in the world. Sane reason immediately perceives that the shackles and chains which bind other people have been removed from their feet and their minds have been cleansed of the narrowness and constraint through which the minds of other people are constrained and fatigued. They are honoured by the frequency of converse with God and are considered worthy of being continuously addressed. They are considered a means of direction and guidance between God, the Glorious and High, and His eager servants. Their own brightness illumines other hearts. As by the advent of spring there is an upsurge in vegetation, in the same way, by their advent, natural light upsurges in obedient temperaments and every fortunate heart desires to make every effort to bring into manifestation its capacities for good fortune, and to be rid of heedlessness, and to be rescued from the darkness of

sinfulness, disobedience, vice, ignorance and unawareness. During their blessed time, there is such spread of light that every believer and seeker after truth, according to the degree of his faith, discovers an expansion and fondness for religiosity without any apparent reason and perceives an increase and strengthening of resolve. In short, from their delicate perfume, which they acquire through the blessing of perfect obedience, every sincere person benefits according to the degree of his sincerity.

It is true, however, that those who are eternally unfortunate, do not partake of it, but advance in rancour and envy and ill fortune and thus fall into hell. This refers to what God says:

*Allah has set a seal on their hearts.*

(Ch.2:V.8)

*(Barahin-e-Ahmadiyya, Ruhani Khazain, Vol. 1 pp. 528-532, sub-footnote 3)*

# Love Thy Neighbour

An address by Hadhrat Mirza Masroor Ahmad, Head of the worldwide Ahmadiyya Muslim community, delivered on 12th November 2006 to a packed audience of 200 neighbours living within the close vicinity of The London Mosque (also known as the Fazal Mosque). The neighbours had a tour of the Fazal Mosque, saw an exhibition and were later entertained to an evening meal. The Head of the community personally met all the neighbours.

---

*Bismillah ir Rahman ir Rahim*

Dear neighbours, ladies and gentlemen

The prayer which I have just recited i.e. *Bismillahir Rahmanir Rahim*, means as you have already listened to its translation, ‘in the name of Allah, the Gracious, the Merciful.’

This is the first verse of the Holy Qur’an. The Holy Prophet of Islam<sup>(saw)</sup> is reported to have said, rather he has commanded the Muslims, to recite this prayer before starting any task as otherwise it would be devoid of Allah’s blessings. So with this beautiful teaching, how can a true Muslim be expected to

wrong anybody, or do any work with bad intentions, or harm anyone, or create problems of any sort around his surroundings? A person who is starting any work in the name of the Gracious and Merciful God cannot win the blessings and mercy of Allah unless God’s attributes of being Gracious and Merciful are depicted in one’s own gestures towards one’s fellow beings.

In the light of this teaching, I would like to request you to remove any feeling or fear of mischief from Ahmadi residents in your neighbourhood. The Qur’anic teachings for the rights of neighbours are so explicitly laid out that a true Muslim who is

always seeking help from the Gracious and Merciful Allah cannot deviate from this, as any slight deviation might cause him to go astray and lose the blessings and love of God.

Allah very beautifully guides us to discharge our duties towards our neighbours and give them their due rights i.e. the rights of all of you sitting in front of me. For this, Allah states in the Holy Qur'an, as you have already listened in the recitation:

*And worship Allah and associate naught with Him, and show kindness to parents, and to kindred, and orphans, and the needy, and to the neighbour that is a kinsman and the neighbour that is a stranger, and the companion by your side, and the wayfarer, and those whom your right hand possess. Surely Allah loves not the proud and the boastful.*

(Ch.4:V.37)

I will just take one or two points from it. Allah says: *show*

*kindness to parents, and to kindred, ... and to the neighbour that is a kinsman and the neighbour that is a stranger. At the end of the verse, Allah says: Surely Allah loves not the proud and the boastful.*

So, see how beautifully the Qur'an has described and covered the rights of one's neighbours. It has equated the right of closest relation with that of the right of a person whom he only knows as a neighbour or one whom he seldom sees. It is difficult to some extent to elaborate and express the Arabic word used for neighbour that is a kinsman and the neighbour that is a stranger. I think that I should try to clear it because, without knowing the right meaning, you would not properly understand it and not know the extent to which the right of the neighbour is established in the Holy Qur'an. It says kinsman; it also means the neighbour that lives near and is kindly. The neighbour that is a stranger may also mean a neighbour living at a distant place and is not kindly.





See, how beautiful a teaching it is that shows kindness to everyone whether he is kind towards you or not. This is how you can create peace, love and harmony in the society and this also means that all the people residing in your vicinity, town, city or even country are your neighbours. Therefore, give them their due rights. No enmity should crop up in anybody's mind. This is how you can spread peace, love and harmony in your surroundings.

At the end God reminds us and gives this commandment that if

you do not behave in this manner and carry out your responsibility in this regard, you are a proud and boastful person. Remember that Allah does not love arrogant and boastful people. This is the beautiful teaching for creating peace

Here I would like also to quote a few Traditions or Sayings of the Holy Prophet of Islam<sup>(saw)</sup> in which we shall see how emphatically he asked his followers to give the rights due to one's neighbours.

One Tradition says:

*'Abu Hurairah relates that the Holy Prophet<sup>(saw)</sup> called out: By Allah, he does not believe, by Allah he does not believe, by Allah he does not believe. He repeated it three times. He was asked: Who does not believe, Messenger of Allah? He said: He whose neighbour is not secure against his mischief.'*  
(Bukhari and Muslim)

Muslim's version is: That one will not enter paradise whose neighbour is not secure against his mischief.

See how clearly he has stated that a person is a non-believer if he causes any mischief to his neighbour.

Then another Tradition, it says:

*[Abu Hurairah relates that the Holy Prophet<sup>(saw)</sup> said]: 'He who believes in Allah and the Last Day, must not put his neighbour to inconvenience; he who believes in Allah and*

*the Last Day must honour his guest; and he who believes in Allah and the Last Day must speak beneficently or keep quiet.'*  
(Bukhari and Muslim)

These are the teachings given to us by the Holy Prophet<sup>(saw)</sup> .

To avail this opportunity, I would also like to present my apologies for any inconvenience which might have put you in any trouble or caused you any problem from our side.

Then another Tradition says:

*'Ibn Umar and Ayesha relate that the Holy Prophe<sup>(saw)</sup> said: Gabriel kept exhorting me about the neighbour till I imagined he would include him in the category of heirs.'*  
(Bukhari and Muslim)

This is the climax of the rights of the neighbour: how beautifully the Holy Prophet of Islam<sup>(saw)</sup> has established the rights of the neighbour.

How can a religion whose teachings are such, be considered as militant? All these militant acts which we are seeing today being committed by some Muslim groups are because of their own vested interests and have nothing to do with the teachings of Islam. As I have made it quite clear by quoting the verse of the Holy Qur'an and the Traditions, I think that if there was any doubt about the attitude of militancy of Muslims in anyone's mind, it should now be removed.

The Ahmadiyya Muslim community is the true follower of the teachings and is spreading the true message of Islam to the world.

I hope that my words will be enough to remove any doubt as I have already said that you might have had in the past.

Because of the time constraint, I can now smell the appetising smell of the meal. I think I should end here and I hope that having listened to what I have briefly explained about the true

teachings of Islam, you would not mind if one day I knock at your front door to enjoy and share my right of neighbourliness. Of course, our doors are always wide open and we very much welcome you at any time with open arms.

Thank you for coming and showing the kind gesture of being a good neighbour. Thank you again. (Applause)

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# Other Teachings About Good Neighbourly Relations:

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A few excerpts from the sayings and writings of the Promised Messiah<sup>(as)</sup> the Founder of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community who states:

I see that there are many who hold no kindness for their brethren. If one brother is dying of hunger, the other pays no attention to it and is not ready to find out about it or if he is in some other difficulty they do not even spend a part of their wealth for him.

In the Traditions of the Holy Prophet<sup>(saw)</sup> there is not only a command to enquire about the well-being of your neighbour but it goes so far as to say that if you make some broth, add some water to it so that you can give it to your neighbour. Now what happens is that they feed

their own stomach but care two hoots about the neighbour.

Do not think that a neighbour merely means the person next door but your brothers, though they may be a hundred miles away from you, are also your neighbours.”

*(Malfoozat Vol. 4 page 215)*

Then the Promised Messiah<sup>(as)</sup> states:

‘You cannot attain the highest grade of virtue unless you spend for the promotion of the welfare of your fellow beings that part of your wealth which you hold dear (3:93)

Render to the poor their due and to the needy and the wayfarer but safeguard

yourselves against extravagance (17:127).

This is a direction to restrain people from spending unnecessarily on weddings and luxuries and on the occasion of the birth of a child etc.

Be benevolent towards parents and kindred and the neighbour who is a kinsman, and the neighbour who is not related to you, and the wayfarer and your servants and your horses and your cattle and your other animals that you possess. This is what God loves.

He loves not those who are heedless and selfish, and those who are niggardly and enjoin other people to be niggardly, and conceal their wealth and tell those who are needy that they have nothing which they

can give them (4:37-38)  
*(The Philosophy of the Teachings of Islam Eng ed pp45-46)*

# Umar ibn al-Khattab<sup>(ra)</sup> – Conquests for Survival

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By Sirajul Haq Khan – UK

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## Hadhrat Umar Bin Khattab<sup>1</sup>

Hadhrat Umar<sup>(ra)</sup> is probably the most well-known Muslim statesman after the Holy Prophet<sup>(saw)</sup>. Hadhrat Umar<sup>(ra)</sup> accepted Islam in the 6th year of the call when he was around 27 years old. Umar<sup>(ra)</sup> was chosen to succeed Abu Bakr<sup>(ra)</sup> as the Caliph and ‘Amirul Mu’mineen<sup>2</sup> and inherited a land at peace internally but whose very existence was threatened. Whether he envisaged the expansion of Islam beyond the Hijaz<sup>3</sup> is difficult to say, but there was certainly no indication from Umar<sup>(ra)</sup> that he would conquer the lands of Persia, although it can be accepted that the conquests of Syria were in fact the fulfillment of the prophecy of the Prophet<sup>(saw)</sup> when he saw a vision in which the keys to Syria were handed to him along with the bracelets of Caesar.<sup>4</sup>

The purport of this essay, is not to outline the life of Umar ibn al-Khattab<sup>(ra)</sup>. It is common knowledge amongst both Muslim historians, as well as Orientalist commentators, that Umar<sup>(ra)</sup>, throughout his caliphate was known amongst his peers and his subjects, as one who shared in the triumphs and tribulations and the joy and grief that was felt by his people. He had no choice but to his role as the Commander of the Faithful, however, he did not consider himself so high in status to his peers so as not to seek their counsel on certain matters – indeed he often sought the wise counsel of Ali<sup>(ra)</sup> and his generals.<sup>5</sup>

Following the example of the perfect exemplar, Muhammad<sup>(saw)</sup>, Umar<sup>(ra)</sup> had the well-being of those under his Caliphate at the

forefront of his mind. It is recorded that his food was simple, consisting of bread and olive oil. At times it is observed that he ate meat, vegetables, milk and vinegar.

In the year of the famine, he would wander the streets to ensure that there was adequate provisions made for the people under his rule. He would often walk the streets, sometimes unknown to his own advisors and servants in order to search for the destitute and then would return to the treasury to obtain provisions for them.

His sense of justice and equality is well-established from the fact that he chose a milkmaid for his own son's marriage due to her nobility of character and resolve, yet he did so with her and her mother's consent.

This article is a sidestep from the well-known instances of the life of Caliph Umar<sup>(ra)</sup> during his rule. It attempts to justify and record the evidence that the wars fought during the early Caliphate were

in response to the threat posed to Islam and the Arab nation by the Empires of Rome and Syria, and provide credence to Umar's<sup>(ra)</sup> rule, and indeed his rulership, as being proportionate, just and righteous.

### **The early Caliphate Wars**

It is an accepted fact that those campaigns waged by the first Caliph, Abu Bakr<sup>(ra)</sup>, were defensive in their very nature and were devoid of any political intention to expand the Islamic state – rather, if studied closely, Abu Bakr<sup>(ra)</sup> was expeditious in differentiating the subjects of his state by ensuring that they either pay the Zakat<sup>6</sup>, or the Jizyah<sup>7</sup>, or they leave the state. It had no wish to rule over those who did not wish to be ruled by Muslims. Clear choices were afforded to them:

1. To accept Islam and pay the Zakat and thus be afforded citizenship within the Muslim State;
2. Not to accept Islam and pay the Jizyah, in order to be

protected by the Muslim armies in times of war;

3. To leave the state if either of the first two options were undesirable.

Umar ibn al Khattab<sup>(ra)</sup> continued the campaigns started by Abu Bakr<sup>(ra)</sup> on these lines. However, the threat faced by Abu Bakr<sup>(ra)</sup> from the Persian and Syrian empires remained. They had no such ethics by which their expansion was motivated. Their intention was a simple expansion of the Empire, motivated by greed, wealth and domination.

A situation came about in the Hijaz whereby, just as the clash between the Makkan pagans and the Muslims in Madinah, it became impossible for Islam to co-exist with the great empires of Persia and Byzantium. The internal peace of Arabia was disturbed. These wars were a reactionary defence to the threat posed to the order of Arabian tribal society.

### **Were Umar's<sup>(ra)</sup> battles aggressive or defensive?**

Umar<sup>(ra)</sup> inherited the volatile situation from his predecessor and took command of the Muslim armies with his characteristic zeal, unrelenting vigour and strategic intelligence to gain control of the vast lands of Persia.

Laura Vaglieri comments on Umar's prudence in this era saying;

'If an isolated episode in Arab history, such as Islam was before the death of the Prophet, was transformed into an event of worldwide importance and the foundations were laid of a Muslim Empire, which civil wars, lack of unity and attacks from abroad might shake but could not destroy, the chief credit for these things must be attributed to the political gifts of Umar.'<sup>8</sup>

He commanded great respect due to his diplomatic skills and accordingly mediated disputes with acumen and wisdom.



Many Orientalist historians have documented the conquests and the spread of Islam with a very restricted view, citing the conquests after the death of the Prophet<sup>(saw)</sup> as being bloody events in history caused by the allegedly inhuman ideologies and strategies of the Caliphs of the Prophet<sup>(saw)</sup> adopted after the establishment of the Islamic State.

Although the Islamic State was first conceived of and implemented in Madinah by the Prophet<sup>(saw)</sup> himself, the State and its governance as established by Umar<sup>(ra)</sup> after the demise of the Prophet<sup>(saw)</sup> is observed as being regime oppressive and unfair towards the non-Muslims living in largely non-Arab civilisations. Non-Muslim historians blame the expansion of the Islamic Empire stating that it was fired by a zeal for religious conversion, lust for wealth and looting and territorial greed.

A careful study of historical documents composed near to this time reveals major omissions in

their argument. One instance that provides ample evidence of Umar's intent is Muir's observations of his words at the conquest of Mesopotamia. When General Ziyad asked Umar's permission to advance to and enter Khurasan, Umar<sup>(ra)</sup> forbade him, saying,

'I desire that between Mesopotamia and the countries beyond, the hills shall be a barrier so that the Persians shall not be able to get at us, nor we at them. The plain of al-Iraq sufficeth for our wants. I would prefer the safety of my people to thousands of spoils and further conquest.'<sup>9</sup>

Muir's own analysis of this was that any thought of a universal mission to conquer was at an embryonic stage; and that the 'obligation to enforce Islam by a universal crusade had not yet dawned upon the Muslim mind.'<sup>10</sup>

This observation dismisses any theory claiming that Islam was

spread by the sword, at least up to the Caliphate of Umar<sup>(ra)</sup>, as these words were uttered in the year 16 A.H., by which time Syria and Mesopotamia had been conquered, thus establishing that from the time these campaigns were undertaken, during Abu Bakr's caliphate and for three years into Umar's caliphate, up to this time, the motives of war were not religious but political for the defence of the State. The above quote from Umar<sup>(ra)</sup> should comprehensively prove that national defence and the safety of the Arabs was the motive behind the battles.

This also exonerates Abu Bakr<sup>(ra)</sup> of the charges with which he, along with Umar<sup>(ra)</sup>, is appended. Umar<sup>(ra)</sup>, being a close confidante of Abu Bakr's<sup>(ra)</sup>, and Ali<sup>(ra)</sup>, advised Abu Bakr<sup>(ra)</sup> on many of the initiatives Abu Bakr<sup>(ra)</sup> undertook. This proves that from the time of the Prophet<sup>(saw)</sup> the only reason Muslims were prompted to take up the sword against the non-Muslims was the safety of the Muslims.<sup>11</sup>

The Muslims could have easily moved on from state to state, and they would have done so if, as alleged, the Muslims were out for territorial gain motivated by greed. But if this was the case, why stop at Persia? Once Persia had been conquered the Muslims were at the pinnacle of their existence as a universal force and could have gone on to further gains. The facts show that this was never their intention. The survival of Islam and the Arab nations with whom treaties were drawn was the only factor driving these wars and the subsequent campaigns.

Nevertheless, what many historians omit is that the forces opposing Islam made no excuses for their intentions of attempting to eliminate Islam and even the whole of the Arabian Peninsula. In the year 14 A.H., the Persian General Rustam made himself known on the battle of Qadisiyyah by exclaiming, 'The whole of Arabia will I smash,'<sup>12</sup> concluding that the non-Muslim forces not only wanted to expel the Muslims from their lands,

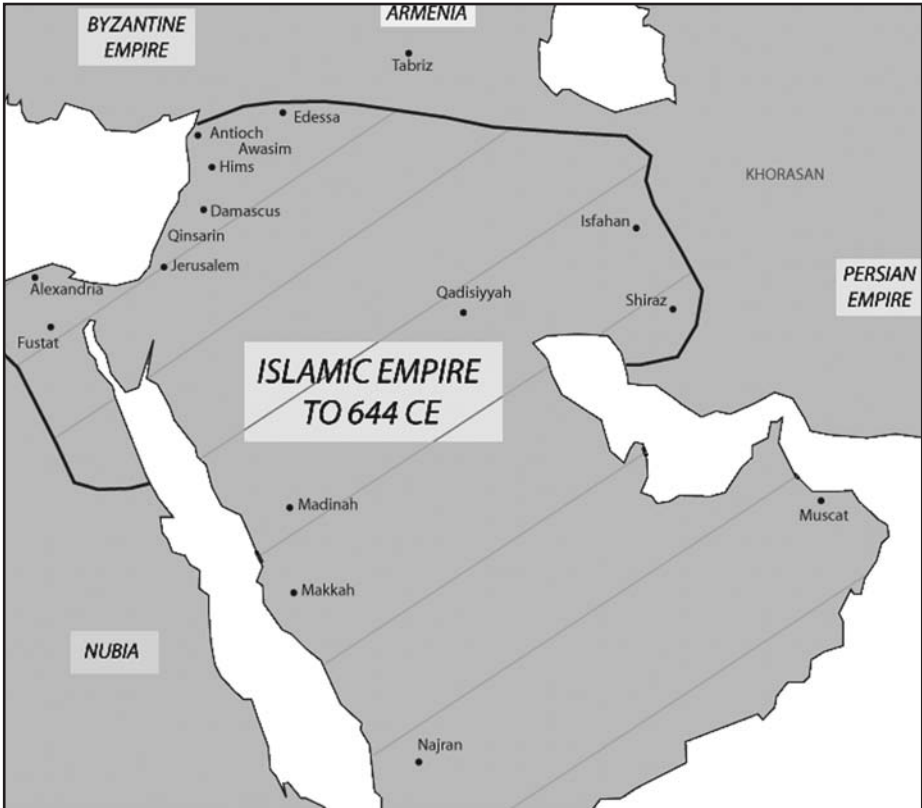
but their intent was to destroy Arabia and the Muslim states. This should not be considered as an isolated incident. Umar<sup>(ra)</sup> sent many convoys to the heads of the various empires in an attempt to determine treaties to provide security to the Islamic state, but they were met only with hostility and often humiliated.<sup>13</sup> Thus they found no other option but to pursue a course of defence through warfare to preserve their own civilisation. However, Umar's stratagem was much different to that of Rustam.

Thus the allegations imbued in the Orientalist view that Umar<sup>(ra)</sup> was provoked by his thirst and lust for land, wealth and domination with an intent to coerce everyone outside the Arabian peninsula into accepting Islam, is a position which is untenable within the context of the earlier historical sources and more specifically, Umar's own policy, as recorded in his sermons and speeches and as received by his Generals.<sup>14</sup>

### **Umar's treatment of citizens in conquered lands**

Al-Waqidi records that when Heraclius, Caesar of the Roman Empire, heard of Umar<sup>(ra)</sup> succeeding Abu Bakr<sup>(ra)</sup>, he summoned all the patricians, princes of the realm and ministers. Heraclius then stood to address them on a pulpit erected for him in a church:

'O Romans, this is what I warned you about, but you would not listen. With the ascension of this brown man, the situation will only worsen. The time has drawn near for a conqueror to come who will resemble Noah. I swear by God that he will most certainly rule what is beneath this platform on which I stand. Beware! Beware, before this occurs and great harm befalls, palaces are demolished, priests are massacred and church bells smashed. This is a man of war who will bring grief to Rome and Persia. He abstains from the world and is stern against those who do



not follow his religion but follow what they like...I know that the religion of these people will triumph over every other religion for as long as they do not change, so either you go to their religion or submit and pay Jizyah.’<sup>15</sup>

Although there is fear in the words of Heraclius, he is quick to

note that Umar<sup>(ra)</sup> was not a man who was given to worldly desires and wealth. Yet Heraclius continues to accuse Abu Bakr<sup>(ra)</sup> as someone who will cause great harm and bloodshed. Importantly, Heraclius himself clarifies that coercion was not a principle of the Muslims – he commands his own people to ‘either go to their religion or submit and pay Jizyah’. If there

was coercion, there would be no choice in the matter – and thus Heraclius would not have needed to advise his people of any alternative. The reality is evident in this matter – the people could either accept Islam, or, if they so wished, remain safe in their own belief systems on the condition that they pay the protection-levy to the Muslims to be protected in case of invasion from a foreign army and not be required to take part in joining an army depending itself against an enemy force.

Even from the early conquest of Hims (in Syria), in 15 A.H, the Orientalists evidence the lack of religious zeal in the Muslims by stating that during the conquests of Hims, the Muslims gave into drinking wine, and thus claim that this proves the lack of ‘Islam’ that drove these conquests. It is true that some Muslims had taken to drinking once they had conquered certain lands in which the booty consisted of such material. However, such a failing of some Yemeni bedouins, cannot prove

that the whole expedition was devoid of any righteous intent. Furthermore, indulging in prohibitions is only to be found in this instance and Umar<sup>(ra)</sup> personally commanded, after consulting with Ali<sup>(ra)</sup>, that the Yemeni bedouins be punished appropriately.<sup>16</sup>

This perspective, compared with what actually took place at the conquest of the Abu al-Quds Fort in Hims manifestly shows that although the Muslims fought hard and fought to the death, their principles and morals could not be compromised. Yet their intent remained unhindered – the safety of the Muslims in their lands. Freedom from invasion remained the motive for their campaigns.

The integrity of the Muslims can be further gauged from the following incident. Umar<sup>(ra)</sup> commanded Abu Ubaydah ‘Aamir ibn al-Jarrah to take charge of the army of Khalid ibn al-Walid. With 500 men Abu Ubaydah marched to meet an army of 5,000 soldiers although some of the Muslims hesitated

considering the odds. Once they reached the Fort they captured the monastery and Khalid ibn Walid called out to the monk. The monk inquired as to what he wanted and retorted ‘in the name of Christ that the Master of Heaven will retaliate against you for the blood of those whom you have slain.’

Khalid, clarifying that these wars were justified due to the advances of the Byzantine and Roman armies and the consequential threat they posed to the Islamic State, stated, ‘By Allah! Had the Holy Prophet<sup>(saw)</sup> not forbidden us, I would not leave you in your monastery, but would kill you in a most evil manner.’<sup>17</sup>

Al-Waqidi’s report proves that even in a state of war the Muslims were firm in their principles and remained steadfast in their recognition of the higher purposes behind these campaigns. Thus their beliefs were uncompromising.

Similarly, at the conquests of

Awasiim and Qinsarin, on seeing the captives weeping and wailing, Abu Ubaydah, through the aid of a translator asked, ‘Say to them, why do you weep? Why do you not embrace Islam. Why did you not seek agreements of safety for your lives and wealth?’ They, numbering around 400, replied that they did not think that the Muslims would reach them. Abu Ubaydah said to them, ‘We will be kind to you and free you. We will return your wealth and families. Will you then accept our rule and pay Jizyah and land-tax?’ To this they replied, ‘If you do this we will obey whatever conditions you impose.’ After consulting the Muslims who concurringly gave their approval, Abu Ubaydah kept his word.<sup>18</sup>

After the captives returned and informed their neighbours of the good nature of the Muslims and the treatment they received, the freed captives said, ‘We thought that they would kill us and enslave our children, but they had mercy upon us and let us stay in our homes upon payment of

Jizyah and land-tax.’ Thereafter, other Romans came to Abu Ubaydah seeking safety with the Muslims.

When Luke, the governor of Qinsarin and Awasim heard of this he was summoned by Heraclius whom Luke advised, ‘We cannot abandon our lands without a violent fight.’ Heraclius appreciated this and promised to send a massive army to supplement the 10,000 at his disposal. He then approached his people and asked for their counsel. The Romans responded praising the Muslims for their trustworthiness, ‘whoever fought against them was defeated. whoever surrendered was allowed to stay safe in their lands, safe from their power. We wish to surrender to save our lives and wealth.’ This undoubtedly enraged Luke who had devised a plan, declaring ‘...these Arabs are victorious against whomsoever fights against them, but in the meantime I will seek a one-year ceasefire with them and then when they are complacent, we will get reinforcements from

Caesar Heraclius and wipe them out to the last man.’<sup>19</sup>

The purpose of the Muslims as evidenced above, was nothing other than self-preservation and internal security, whereas that of the Romans was clearly to eliminate the Muslims – proving that the Muslims faced a real threat – not to their ideology but to their very existence. In addition to this, the Romans’ willingness to be ruled by the Muslims has been commented upon comprehensively in that some Romans actually preferred to live under a Muslim ‘ruler who was impartial towards various Christian groups...’<sup>xx</sup> inferring that this was not the case under Roman rule.

### **The Jizyah**

It is important at this point to note that the requirement to pay Jizyah was not an immovable one. It is common knowledge that in some of the battles, the Jizyah was replaced by military service as there was no longer a need to protect a person beside you engaged in the battle.

Additionally, in the conquests of Syria after Antioch had been conquered, when the Jizyah was demanded, it was accordingly refused, citing the fact that the people would fight alongside the Muslims if attacked. The Muslims accepted that this exempted the payment of Jizyah.

In many of the battles, Christians had fought side-by-side with the Muslim armies. This not only put an end to the myth of the alleged 'Islamic domination' that was alleged to have taken place (for the Christians would never partake in such a war), but also proving that it was a matter of survival of the Arab people. These wars were a reactionary movement by an enemy common to Arabs, be they Christian Arabs or Muslim Arabs.

### **Umar<sup>(ra)</sup> arrives in Jerusalem**

The march onto Baitul Muqaddas (Jerusalem) is well-known. Umar<sup>(ra)</sup> was the Ruler of Arabia, Mesopotamia and Syria. Yet it is not Umar's status as a Ruler, but paradoxically, the simplicity and humility with which he

approached the victory. When he reached Baitul Muqaddas he called out, 'Allahu Akbar! O Allah, grant us an easy victory and send us Your helping power!'

After leading the morning prayer the next day, Umar<sup>(ra)</sup> ordered Abu Ubaydah, 'O 'Amir, go and inform the people that I have arrived.' The patriarch learnt that Umar<sup>(ra)</sup> had arrived, and with the Patriarch was Baltic, the governor, who said, 'O Father, you should be able to recognise him...failing that we will not open the gates and will fight until either they or we are destroyed.' The two then climbed the wall and called out to Abu Ubaydah, 'What do you want, old man?' Abu Ubaydah replied, 'This is Umar, Commander of the believers. There is no commander above him. Now come to receive his amnesty, to surrender and to pay the Jizyah.'

The patriarch demanded, 'If he really is the highest ranking then let him approach us so that we can recognise [him]...let him come out alone from amongst



you and stand directly in line with us so that we can see him. If he is the man described in the scriptures then we will come down, seek amnesty and pay the Jizyah...if not then you will get nothing but battle from us.’

Abu Ubaydah went to inform Umar<sup>(ra)</sup> of their request. When Umar<sup>(ra)</sup> was about to depart, his men said, ‘O Commander of the Believers, are you going to them without any weapons, all alone and wearing only these rags? We fear treachery against you.’

Then Umar<sup>(ra)</sup> recited:

*Say: ‘Nothing shall befall us save that which Allah has ordained for us. He is our Protector. And in Allah then should the believers put their trust.’*<sup>21</sup>

He then mounted his camel wearing nothing besides his rags and a cotton cap on his head. With only Abu Ubaydah riding ahead of him Umar<sup>(ra)</sup> was walking towards the patriarch. When they came to the patriarch

and governor and stopped next to them, Abu Ubaydah called out, ‘This is the Commander of the Believers.’ The patriarch rubbed his eyes and looked, and shouted, ‘This is he who is described in our books, the man who will conquer our city without doubt.’<sup>22</sup>

Thus was Baitul Muqaddas conquered. Umar<sup>(ra)</sup> made a treaty with the people of Baitul Muqaddas which conclusively shows the treatment by the Muslims of those they conquered.<sup>23</sup>

### Conclusion

In conclusion, few events in history, and indeed, few men in history, combine the grace of a victor with the humility of a God-fearing servant. An accurate display of how Umar<sup>(ra)</sup> showed both these characteristics can be found by observing his nature at the time when Umar<sup>(ra)</sup> was touring the town with the patriarch of Jerusalem. At the time of prayer they happened to be in a magnificent ancient church.<sup>24</sup> The patriarch

suggested that Umar<sup>(ra)</sup> should offer his prayers in the church. Umar<sup>(ra)</sup> refused the kind gesture, clarifying that they shall neither say their prayers there nor in the church of Constantine where preparations had been made for the prayer service. Umar's reasoning behind this move proved to be one of utter humility and respect for faith. His foresight led him to prophesise that 'should we say our prayers here, the Muslims might some day claim the right to erect a mosque in this place.' With this he set a shining example of freedom of worship and sanctity of places of worship for all – Muslims and non-Muslims alike. In light of such high morals and such careful deliberation, the Orientalists have an uphill task in proving that the Muslim conquests under Umar<sup>(ra)</sup> were motivated by anything other than establishing the safety and civilisation of the Muslim and non-Muslim Arabs, whose very safety and existence was threatened by the regimes of Rome and Persia.

## REFERENCES

1. Caliphate; 634 - 644. His full name, identifying his lineage, is: Umar ibn al-Khattab ibn Nuafil ibn 'Abdul-'Uzza ibn Riyah ibn Qart ibn Razah ibn 'Adi ibn Ka'b ibn Lu'ayy, Amir al-Mu'minin, Abu Hafs, al-Quraishi, al-'Adawi, al-Faruq.
2. Lit. Commander of the Faithful.
3. The Arab peninsula.
4. Ibn Ishaq, *Sirat Rasul Allah* (translated by A. Guillaume), p. 452; Ibn Kathir, *al-Bidaya*, 4.116; Ibn Hanbal, 4.303; Ibn Hisham, *Sira*, 3.230. It should be noted that in some transmissions the keys to Syria are mentioned whereas in others the keys to Persia are mentioned – due to non-defined state-borders.
5. See Imam al-Waqidi., *The Islamic Conquest of Syria*, (translated by Mawlana Sulayman al-Kindi) Ta-Ha Publishers for a record of letters and requests sent to his generals and peers for

- advice on many issues.
6. 2.5% tax paid on wealth saved and unused over a year – to be earmarked for the use of those who are less well-off in the community, the poor, widows, orphans, homeless, etc.
  7. Protection tax paid by non-Muslims living in a Muslim State to the government
  8. Cambridge History of Islam, Vol. 1, p.64.
  9. Muir, W., *The Caliphate*.
  10. Ibid.
  11. Muir, W., *The Biography of Mahomet and Rise of Islam*, p.297.
  12. Ali, Maulana Muhammad, *The Early Caliphate*, p.66.
  13. Imam al-Waqidi., *The Islamic Conquest of Syria*, (translated by Mawlana Sulayman al-Kindi) Ta-Ha Publishers. (See various Chapters for record of letters, treaties and sermons of ‘Umar sent to the various heads of states and to his own generals.)
  14. Ibid.,
  15. This speech was given in the year 634 corresponding to 13A.H. Imam al-Waqidi., *The Islamic Conquest of Syria*, p.158. (translated by Mawlana Sulayman al-Kindi) Ta-Ha Publishers.
  16. Ibid., p.178.
  17. Ibid., p.177
  18. Ibid., p.184
  19. Ibid., p.185
  20. Hourani, Albert, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, p. 24, (1991).
  21. The Holy Qur’an, Ch.9:V.51.
  22. Imam al-Waqidi., *The Islamic Conquest of Syria*, p.398-9. (translated by Mawlana Sulayman al-Kindi) Ta-Ha Publishers.
  23. The text of this treaty can be found in Tabari but the reference is unavailable. For a translation one should refer to; Ali, Maulana Muhammad, *The Early Caliphate*, p.89
  24. Known commonly as the Church of the Resurrection

# DIVINITY AND TRINITY:

## *A scriptural comparison*

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By Arif Khan – London, UK

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The classic Christian-Islamic debate on the status of Jesus<sup>(as)</sup> touches many aspects of his life. Orthodox Christianity claims that the miracles of Jesus<sup>(as)</sup> and the terminology used in the Bible regarding Jesus<sup>(as)</sup> denote a unique status of him being the literal son of God. Interestingly enough similar episodes and aspects of Jesus' life are also found in the Holy Qur'an, yet it presents such events in a completely different light and considers them as evidence of Jesus<sup>(as)</sup> being a true prophet of God. It further notes that similar such miracles and events are also linked with the lives of other prophets before Jesus<sup>(as)</sup>, who were not deemed to be part of the Divine, so presenting consistency in the relationship between terminology and divine favour with the status of prophethood.

This article reflects on the Biblical and Qur'anic accounts concerning the two issues commonly presented by Christianity in support of Jesus' Divinity – namely the Virgin Birth and reference to Jesus<sup>(as)</sup> as the 'Word of God'. It also considers the role and nature of the third element of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, as noted in the two scriptures. Against this backdrop it then presents viewpoints of some modern Christian scholars reflecting a broader scepticism regarding the concepts of Divinity and Trinity.

### **The Virgin Birth**

The incident of the Virgin Birth is common to both Islam and Christianity, yet the interpretation of who Jesus<sup>(as)</sup> was based upon this event is radically different in the two faiths. For

Christians the Virgin Birth is part of the proof of Christ's divinity whereas for Muslims it was a special manifestation of God's power, but one which in no way elevates Jesus<sup>(as)</sup> to the position of divinity.

What is interesting is that both scriptures link the birth of Jesus<sup>(as)</sup> with the birth of John the Baptist<sup>(as)</sup>. Whilst the two events are certainly linked chronologically the similarity between the two events does not end there. The Bible notes the fact that the birth of John the Baptist<sup>(as)</sup> was as a result of the prayers of Zachariah<sup>(as)</sup>, but it stays silent on the precursor to the birth of Jesus<sup>(as)</sup>, when in fact that is a key element of the virgin birth.

Let us first look at the biblical account of the birth of John the Baptist<sup>(as)</sup>. The Bible notes that Zachariah<sup>(as)</sup> was a priest and more importantly that he and his wife were 'both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.' (Luke

1:6). Of all the Gospels the Gospel of Luke is the only one to detail the story of Zachariah<sup>(as)</sup> and his barren wife. It states:

'But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John. And thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth. For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb.'

*(Luke 1:13-15)*

This makes it clear that the miraculous conception and birth of John the Baptist<sup>(as)</sup> was an act of God resulting from the acceptance of the prayers of a righteous servant of God. The amazement of Zachariah<sup>(as)</sup> at the prospect of a son being born to him and his barren wife (Luke 1:7), both of whom were advanced in years, is evident from his expression on hearing

this news, for he said:

‘Whereby shall I know this?  
for I am an old man and my  
wife well stricken in years.’  
(*Luke 1:18*)

If we now look at the account in the Holy Qur’an we see that it reflects the Biblical account and emphasises the piety of Zachariah<sup>(as)</sup>. It also relates the actual prayers of Zachariah<sup>(as)</sup>, something that is missing in the Biblical narrative.

The detailed account of Zachariah<sup>(as)</sup> in Holy Qur’an is in chapter 19 (*Sura Maryam*). The Chapter initially begins with the account of how Zachariah<sup>(as)</sup> and his barren wife were blessed with John the Baptist<sup>(as)</sup>, referred to in the Holy Qur’an as ‘Yahya’ and of the deep prayers of Zachariah<sup>(as)</sup> and how these were answered.

*He [Zachariah] said, ‘My Lord, the bones have indeed waxed feeble in me, and the head glistens with hoariness but never, my Lord have I*

*been unblessed in my prayer to Thee. And I fear my relations after me, and my wife is barren. Grant me therefore, a successor from Thyself, that he may be heir to me and to the House of Jacob. And make him my Lord, well-pleasing to Thee.*

*‘O Zachariah, We give thee glad tidings of a son whose name shall be Yahya. We have not made any one before him of that name’. He said ‘My Lord, how shall I have a son when my wife is barren and I have reached the extreme limit of old age?’ He said, ‘So it is.’ But thy Lord says, ‘It is easy for Me, and indeed I created thee before, when thou wast nothing.’*  
(Ch.19:Vs.5-10)

The accounts are similar in the Bible and the Holy Qur’an but more importantly they relate a clear theme of a miraculous birth resulting from the sincere prayers of the progenitor of Zachariah<sup>(as)</sup>. This provides a useful benchmark to analyse the next account

that relates to the virgin birth of Jesus<sup>(as)</sup>. It is interesting to note that whilst the Bible is silent on the background to the birth of Jesus<sup>(as)</sup>, the Qur'an presents this important piece of the historical jigsaw, to enable a logical conclusion to be drawn from the chain of events that precede and therefore link the two births.

If we look at the Bible first then we note that the conception of Jesus<sup>(as)</sup> is described in little detail. Matthew simply describes what was in Mary's womb as being 'of the Holy Ghost' (Matthew 1:20), Mark is silent on the matter and John describes it as the Word 'made flesh'. John's account is dealt with in a later section.

Again it is only Luke that deals with this in any detail and narrates this immediately after the conception of John the Baptist<sup>(as)</sup>.

'And the angel [Gabriel] said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God. And, behold, thou shalt

conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name Jesus.'

*(Luke 1:30-31)*

Again an expression of surprise is evident for Mary responded by saying, 'How shall this be, seeing that I know not a man?' (Luke 1:34) In response to this the example of John the Baptist<sup>(as)</sup> is given, with the angel noting that,

'And behold, thy cousin Elisabeth, she hath also conceived a son in her old age...who was called barren. For with God nothing shall be impossible.'

*(Luke 1:36-37)*

This reinforces the idea that, whilst the birth of Jesus<sup>(as)</sup> was unusual, there was a strong link between the phenomenon of the conception of Jesus<sup>(as)</sup> and that of John the Baptist<sup>(as)</sup>.

When we turn to the Qur'anic narrative again it provides a missing link to the episode – that being the deep prayers that preceded the conception. In this

instance we are told that whilst in the case of John the Baptist<sup>(as)</sup> it was Zachariah's prayer that was answered, in the case of Jesus<sup>(as)</sup> the prayer that was answered was actually that offered by Mary's mother, Hanna. It again begins by noting that the family of Imran was righteous for it states that:

*Allah did choose Adam and Noah and the family of Abraham and the family of Imran above all peoples.*  
(Ch.3:V.34)

It further witnesses the piety of Mary whom it describes as 'above the women of all peoples' (Ch3: V.43) This indicates that it was the piety of both the family of Imran and of Mary in particular that was to play a key role in the conception of Jesus<sup>(as)</sup>.

The Qur'an relates Hanna's prayer for a righteous offspring as she prayed for a child whom she could dedicate to the service of the Temple. The Qur'anic account also clarifies that Hanna fully expected a son as it was

only men who were normally dedicated to the service of the Temple. The Qur'an states,

*Remember when the woman of Imran said, 'My Lord, I have vowed to Thee what is in my womb to be dedicated to Thy service. So do accept it of me; verily Thou along art All-Hearing, All-Knowing.' But when she was delivered of it, she said, 'My Lord, I am delivered of a female – and Allah knows best what she delivered forth and the male she was thinking of was not like the female she had brought forth – 'and I have named her Mary, and I commit her and her off-spring to Thy protection from Satan the rejected'.*  
(Ch.3:Vs.36-37)

Hanna was surprised and confused as to how she could dedicate the child now as she had given birth to Mary. Nevertheless she dedicated Mary to the Temple. With hindsight this proved a wise move as it protected her from any false



charge of being unchaste. This also is evidence of Hanna's complete trust in God to answer her prayers for a righteous offspring. Her prayers were to be answered in full in the birth of her grandchild for the miraculous aspect of his birth was that it would occur without the agency of a father. So whilst Hanna and Mary were exceptional in their piety, it is likely that Mary was also exceptional in her biological make up that allowed her mother's prayer to be fulfilled and result in the birth of a great Prophet of God.

The conception of Jesus<sup>(as)</sup> is then narrated in the following detail,

*When the angles said, 'O Mary, Allah gives thee glad tidings of a word from him; his name shall be Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, honoured in this world and in the next, and of those who are granted nearness to God.*

(Ch.3:V.46)

*She said, 'My Lord, how shall I have a son, when no man*

*has touched me?' He said, 'Such is the way of Allah. He creates what He pleases. When He decrees a thing, He says to it, "Be" and it is.'*  
(Ch.3:V.48)

Again we hear of the birth of Jesus<sup>(as)</sup> being bestowed upon Mary due to her having 'found favour with God'. In the Gospel of Luke the angel is reported to have related this miracle of the birth of Jesus<sup>(as)</sup> with the birth of John the Baptist<sup>(as)</sup>, just as in the Qur'anic account.

All the above suggests that rather than linking a special event with the Divinity of a person the true message is found in the piety of the people involved in the events and their deep prayers that were subsequently answered by God. Indeed, whilst the subject matter of the Virgin birth is no doubt a complex event, the Qur'an makes clear that the roots of the Virgin birth go back to Mary's mother dedicating her offspring to God. The Virgin birth of Jesus<sup>(as)</sup> was therefore as a result of prayers to Allah being fulfilled

as much as the birth of John the Baptist<sup>(as)</sup> was the result of the prayers of Zachariah<sup>(as)</sup>. This detailed explanation rules out any questions about it having anything to do with the possible divinity of Jesus<sup>(as)</sup>.

### **Jesus<sup>(as)</sup> as ‘The Word’**

The second issue relates to the famous enigmatic opening of the Gospel of John that refers to Jesus<sup>(as)</sup> as ‘the word’. This comes from the Greek idea of the ‘logos’. Whilst a detailed explanation of this term is not appropriate here, it is interesting to note how again Islam and Christianity again use very similar nomenclature for Jesus<sup>(as)</sup>, yet with very different consequences and implications. The Gospel of John opens with:

‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.’  
(*John 1:1*)

In the Gospel of John, which is acknowledged as being different from the synoptic Gospels, we read right at the start how Jesus<sup>(as)</sup>

was part of God. He is referred to as being part of ‘the Word’ and later in the opening verses we have:

‘and the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.’ (*John 1:14*)

The idea of Jesus<sup>(as)</sup> as the ‘Word’ is an intrinsic part of the doctrine of the proposed trinity and the divinity of Christ. It is sometimes argued that the Qur’an has used similar terminology and that it concurs with the view that the Word of God i.e. Jesus<sup>(as)</sup> was in part divine.

Whilst the Holy Qur’an also refers to Jesus<sup>(as)</sup> as ‘a Word’, as we have seen in Chapter 3 Verse 46, it does so in the manner of describing Jesus<sup>(as)</sup> as being conceived as a result of a ‘Word’ or a ‘command’ from Allah, rather than as him being a part of Allah Himself. The Arabic term used in verse 46 is ‘Kalimah’ which amongst other, means a

word; a decree; a command. This interpretation is also supported by the Bible as in Luke 1:38 Mary acknowledges the news of Jesus<sup>(as)</sup> by saying ‘be it unto me according to thy word’.

The Qur’an also presents a second interpretation regarding the title ‘Kalimat Allah’ (i.e. Word of Allah) in that Jesus<sup>(as)</sup> was a prophet through whom truth was spread in calling people to God. Again this also does not infer any status beyond that of prophethood as ascribed to other prophets who performed similar roles before Jesus<sup>(as)</sup>. In *The Heavenly Sign*, Hadhrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad<sup>(as)</sup> expounds how the ‘Kalimatullah’ can be considered a spiritual state reserved for the very highest.

Thus whilst the Holy Qur’an certainly uses similar terminology for Jesus<sup>(as)</sup> being a ‘Word of God’, it does not in anyway equate him with God, or a part of God.

### **The Holy Spirit & Trinity**

Christians are familiar with the

term ‘Holy Spirit’ or ‘Holy Ghost’. The ‘Holy Spirit’ is allegedly the third person in the trinity and Jesus<sup>(as)</sup> is recorded as referring to the ‘Holy Spirit’ several times in the Gospels (e.g. Matthew 12:31-32, Matthew 28:19, Mark 3:29, Mark 12:36, Mark 13:11)

The use of the term Holy Spirit or Holy Ghost in the Bible strongly indicates that this is a manifestation of God’s power through the medium of His angels. Expressions such as the Holy Ghost ‘speaking through people’ or people being ‘strengthened or filled’ by the Holy Spirit suggest that it is an entity that works under God’s command to serve a particular spiritual purpose. It is sometimes mentioned alongside God but that alone is not sufficient to grant it divinity, for if that were the case then all others (e.g. John the Baptist<sup>(as)</sup> in Luke 1:15 is said to have been ‘filled with the Holy Ghost’) who were mentioned alongside the Holy Ghost should also be ascribed divinity as well, which they clearly are not.

With this in mind when we read in Matthew 1:18 that Mary was found ‘with the child of the Holy Ghost’ it becomes clearer that this refers both to the spiritual status of Jesus<sup>(as)</sup> as a prophet as well as the fact that the news of the conception of Jesus<sup>(as)</sup> that was given to Mary by the Holy Spirit.

Does the Qur’an offer any clarification on this issue? Again it is fascinating to see that similar terminology is used in the Holy Qur’an in several places. The Holy Qur’an mentions the Holy Spirit strengthening Jesus<sup>(as)</sup>,

*When Allah will say ‘O Jesus son of Mary, remember My favour upon thee and upon thy mother; when I strengthened thee with the Spirit of holiness so that thou didst speak to the people in the cradle and in middle age; and when I taught thee the Book and Wisdom and the Torah and the Gospel; ...*  
(Ch.5:V.111)

It also relates that it is through the Holy Spirit that the Qur’an

was revealed,

*Say, ‘The Spirit of holiness has brought it down from thy Lord with truth, that He may strengthen those who believe and as a guidance and glad tiding for Muslims’*  
(Ch.16:V.103)

The ‘Ruh al Qudus’ or ‘Holy Spirit’ mentioned here is another name for the angel Gabriel since we know that the Holy Qur’an was revealed through Gabriel.

Although at first the Holy Qur’an apparently parallels the Gospels in its nomenclature and terminology, the meaning of the term is very different in meaning in the two religions. In fact the Qur’anic account offers a helpful clarification of the biblical terminology which when re-applied to the Bible provides fresh insight into its true meaning.

### **Rejection of Trinity in the Qur’an**

The idea that the Holy Spirit as part of a ‘trinity’ that makes up

the supreme deity in the universe is further rejected in no uncertain terms in the Holy Qur'an:

*They are surely disbelieves who say, 'Allah is the third of three;' there is no god but the One God. And if they do not desist from what they say, a grievous punishment shall surely befall those of them that disbelieve. (Ch.5:V.74)*

To make absolutely clear its perspective of the meaning of the terminology used in the Qur'an, it rejects in the strongest possible terms the idea of a Trinity. This additional emphasis on not just the unity of God but also the specific rejection of the Trinity is again aimed at removing misconceptions that may have gained favour amongst followers of Christianity. If there were any doubts over this based on the similar terminology and phraseology for Jesus<sup>(as)</sup> and the Holy Spirit then these clear rejections provide the final definitive answer to such false notions.

*And they say, 'Allah has taken to Himself a son.' Holy is He! Nay, everything in the Heavens and the earth belongs to Him. To Him are all obedient. (Ch.2:V.117)*

*Allah has not taken unto Himself any son, nor is there any other God along with Him; in that case each god would have taken away what he had created, and some of them would, surely, have dominated over others. Glorified be Allah far above that which they attribute to Him; (Ch.23:V.92)*

*They have indeed disbelieved who say, 'Surely, Allah is none but the Messiah, son of Mary.' Say, 'Who then has any power against Allah, if He desire to bring to naught the Messiah, son of Mary, and his mother and all those that are in the earth?' And to Allah belongs the kingdom of the heavens and the earth and what is between them. He creates what He pleases and*

*Allah has power to do all things. (Ch.5:V.18)*

*And when Allah will say, ‘O Jesus, son of Mary, didst thou say to men, ‘Take me and my mother for two gods beside Allah?’ he will answer, ‘Holy art Thou, I could never say that to which I had no right. If I had said it, Thou wouldst have surely known it. Thou knowest what is in my mind, and I know not what is in Thy mind. It is Thou alone Who art the Knower of hidden things; (Ch.5:V.117)*

What is very interesting is that modern day Christian scholarship now strongly supports the view of the Qur’an regarding Jesus<sup>(as)</sup>. Today Biblical scholarship and textual criticism are areas in which the majority of scholars argue heavily against the idea of a trinity or Jesus<sup>(as)</sup> as part of God, and thus implicitly support the Qur’anic viewpoint of Jesus<sup>(as)</sup> as mortal man. Below are a few examples of such scholars and their publications.

### **Thomas Sheehan**

In his highly acclaimed book, *The First Coming: How the Kingdom of God Became Christianity*, Sheehan analyses the person of Jesus<sup>(as)</sup> and relates how one Messianic figure was changed to the literal ‘Son of God’ and part of a Trinity.

‘Today, at the dawn of her third millennium, the Christian church is undergoing a crisis over the truth about Jesus of Nazareth. The crisis grows out of a fact now freely admitted by both Catholic and Protestant theologians: that as far as can be discerned from available historical data, Jesus of Nazareth did not think he was divine, did not assert any of the messianic claims that the New Testament attributes to him, and went to his death without ever intending to found a new religion called ‘Christianity’<sup>i</sup>

Although his deconstruction of the person of Jesus<sup>(as)</sup> may be seen to go too far, in his denial that Jesus<sup>(as)</sup> claimed to be the Jewish Messiah, Sheehan’s

vision of Jesus<sup>(as)</sup> is in line with the Islamic view of Jesus<sup>(as)</sup>.

### **E.P Sanders**

In his book 'The Historical Figure of Jesus' Sanders analysis what we know about Jesus<sup>(as)</sup> through detailed textual analysis. On the issue of his divinity and title as 'Son of God' he writes:

'The early Christians, then, used 'Son of God' of Jesus but they did not think that he was a hybrid, half God and half human. They regarded 'Son of God' as a high designation, but we cannot go much beyond that.... The first followers of Jesus, however, when they started calling him 'Son of God', would have meant something much vaguer: a person standing in a special relationship to God, who chose him to accomplish a task of great importance.'<sup>ii</sup>

### **Bishop John Shelby Spong**

In his bold 'Why Christianity Must Change or Die' the controversial Bishop writes:

'Thus it was that by drawing on their sacred history, the first century Jewish folk found the words to talk about the God presence that they had met in Jesus. They knew no God except a God defined as an external being with supernatural powers, and so they described the God presence they met in Jesus in the only God language they knew how to use. God had come down by spiritual conception or by an outpouring of heavenly spirit upon him. Jesus was a spirit person, a window in to the holy, an incarnation of the divine. Underneath the description, however, lay an experience, and it is that experience that beckons us even as we set the literalness of their description of that experience aside.'<sup>iii</sup>

Bishop Spong here expands the idea that referring to Jesus<sup>(as)</sup> as 'God Incarnate' was not a literal statement at all, but merely an expression of how the people felt that Jesus<sup>(as)</sup> was a special figure with great closeness to God.

## The Myth of God Incarnate

The most comprehensive analysis of the divinity of Jesus<sup>(as)</sup> by prominent Christian scholars is a series of Essays compiled in a text entitled *The Myth of God Incarnate*. This book, edited by John Hicks, contains essays by: John Hicks (*Professor of Theology*); Don Cupitt (*Lecturer in Divinity, Cambridge University*); Michael Goulder (*Staff Tutor in Theology, Birmingham University*); Leslie Houlden (*College Principle, Cuddesdon*); Dennis Nineham (*College Warden, Oxford*); Maurice Wiles (*Chairman of the Church of England's Doctrine Commission*).

The conclusion of all these excellent essays is that the title of 'Son of God' is not a literal expression of any biological relationship. The 'incarnation' is thoroughly and strongly argued against throughout the treatise. Early on, in the first essay, Maurice Wiles put things in perspective:

In the preface the overall

conclusion and purpose of the book is explained:

'The writers of this book are convinced that another major theological development is called for in this last part of the twentieth century. The need arises from growing knowledge of Christian origins, and involves a recognition that Jesus was (as he is presented in Acts 2:21) 'a man approved by God' for a special role within the divine purpose, and that the later conception of him as God incarnate, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity living a human life, is a mythological or poetic way of expressing his significance for us. This recognition is called for in the interests of truth;'<sup>iv</sup>

In his essay 'The Christ of Christendom' he elaborates his view of the concept of Jesus<sup>(as)</sup> as 'Son of God'. At the end of his essay, the 7th out of 10 in *The Myth of God Incarnate* he writes:

'From all this I conclude that the doctrine of the incarnation has



had some harmful effects upon the understanding of Jesus' message, on the understanding of his relation to God and even upon faith in God.<sup>v</sup>

### **Dr James Tabor**

Perhaps the most recent work on this subject comes from Dr James Tabor, Chair of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina, *The Jesus Dynasty*. In this book, Dr Tabor attempts a reconstruction of the life of Jesus<sup>(as)</sup> based on the most reliable sources of scripture and evidence from archaeology. Dr Tabor's book contains perhaps one of the clearest and most explicit affirmations of the truth of the Islamic view of Jesus<sup>(as)</sup> by a Christian scholar. In the conclusion to his treatise Dr Tabor writes:

‘There are some rather striking connections between the research I have presented in *The Jesus Dynasty* and the traditional beliefs of Islam. The Muslim emphasis on Jesus as a messianic prophet

and teacher is quite parallel to what we find in the Q source, in the book of James, and in the Didache...there is little about the views of Jesus presented in this book that conflicts with Islam's basic perception.<sup>vi</sup>

### **Beauty of The Holy Qur'an**

Over the centuries the Islamic viewpoint on Jesus<sup>(as)</sup> has been ignored to a large extent by the Christian scholars. The Christian orthodoxy has been strongly against any faith system or individual questioning the divinity of Christ. Groups denying this, such as the Christian group, the Cathars of the 11th and 12th century, were tortured heavily by the inquisition and crushed as rebellious heretics.

In the last 150 years, however, there has been a new critical approach to the study of the Gospels. Scholars have started to analyse the narrative deeply and apply source criticism and review techniques applied to many historical documents to the Gospels themselves.

This research has reinforced the truth of the Holy Qur'an, for statements made over 1400 years ago in clear words are now finding favour with Christian scholars. The emphatic statements of the post-Nicean Church, that so many thousands have been killed for questioning, are increasingly being shown to be incorrect by the Biblical experts and scholars themselves. This reflects an increasing awareness of the fact that the 1400 year old Qur'anic statements appear to tell us more about the real meaning of the Biblical Jesus<sup>(as)</sup>.

- iv Hicks, John, Myth of God Incarnate, SCM Press Limited, London, 1993, p.ix
- v Ibid., p.145
- vi Tabor, Dr James, The Jesus Dynasty, HarperColins Publishers limited, London, 2006 p.287

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- iii Spong, John Shelby, Why Christianity Must Change or Die, HarperColins Publishers limited, New York, 1999, p.112

# Native American Beliefs

By Fazal Ahmad – London, UK

Native Americans prefer to be known as First Nations or aboriginal rather than as Indians. These people were thought to have migrated over the iced Bering Straits to the Americas over 10,000 years ago, and are believed to be genetically linked to the Mongols of Indo-China. More recent evidence suggests the same migratory origins, but that the migration took place earlier (suggestions are around 12,500 years ago) and by boat to the Pacific coastline of North and South America rather than via the Bering Straits.

In recent times, Native Americans have become integrated into Canadian and US mainstream society (more so in Canada than in the USA) although they still have their own reservations (tracts of land that originally belonged to their tribes). Three hundred years ago, the situation was different, with hundreds of diverse tribes across the continent who had their own regions, customs, traditions and history, and variations of religious belief and practice.

Many of the tribal names still survive to this day such as Cherokee, Sioux, Blackfoot, Ottawa, Apache and Iriquois. There was no single nation of Native Americans, but rather a collection of tribes that co-existed.

This article examines their spiritual beliefs on subjects such as Creation, the Creator and worship. They also had a strong sense of their co-existence with the nature around them and the preservation of the ecosystem in which they participated.

## Creation and Earth

The natives of Canada respected nature and the Earth, which they understood to be creations of the Great Spirit, and as a result, they always tried to live in harmony with nature.

The Pueblo Zuni tribe of the southwest North American desert had a tradition of how their deity Awonawilona created the heavens and the earth and then the first man, Poshaiyangkyo. The two lesser



**Map of First Nations tribes across North America**

forms of nature that sprang up were the Earth Mother known as Awitelin Tsta, and the Sky Father, known as Apoyan Tachi. (See Gordon, p.66) Their neighbours, the Hopi (name meaning Peace) tribe had a tradition about four different ages of creation, each destroyed and superceded by a new age just as we see in other traditions such as Hinduism. Creation was initiated by Taiowa. The Earth Mother he created gave birth to the races of man. In other words, they believed in a Creator that had made the earth and all of

their provisions for them, and then made man to settle on the earth.

Tribes as far north as the Inuit of Alaska, and those that travelled further south, all had a deep respect for nature and their position in the ecosystem. They believed that their creator was Igaluk, the moon god, while Sedna, the one-eyed sea goddess controlled population by drowning men.

It was only the Inuit Shaman (see later) that could mollify Sedna and

prevent storms from ravaging their coastline. The Inuit are very careful not to disturb the balance of nature around them. The Cheyenne tribe based in North-West America held nature in respect as we see from the words of one of their songs:

*The earth produces herbs.  
The herbs cause us to live.  
They cause long life.  
They cause us to be happy.*  
(Cheyenne song)

Similarly, there is an Okanagan Creation tradition:

*Thus all living beings came from  
the earth. When we look around,  
we see part of our (Earth)  
Mother everywhere.*  
(Okanagan Creation)

And the Sioux of central North America respected their wildlife as illustrated by the following prayer:

*Behold this Buffalo, O  
Grandfather; which you have  
given us.  
He is the chief of all four-leggeds  
upon our Sacred Mother.  
From him the people live and  
with him they walk the sacred  
path.*  
(Sioux prayer)

So you start to get a sense that the tribes understood their position within the ecosystem, and recognised that for the sake of their long-term survival, they needed to live in harmony with the animals, flora and fauna around them. Modern green politics has a lot to learn from them.

The Micmac people of Nova Scotia, north-east Canada believe that Gluscap created man and the provisions while his brother Malsum fought him, and set up plants, animals and conditions to make man's life hazardous and difficult. This Micmac concept echoes beliefs about good and evil, with Malsum playing a role similar to that of Satan in the Abrahamic faiths. Similarly, the Navaho describe a hero of light called Nayenezgani (slayer of alien gods) and his counterpart, the evil Tobadzistsini. (Gordon, p.279-280, 485)

Creek and related tribes of the south-east North America have a myth about their Creator Esaugetuh Emissee (Jordan, p.45) who breathes life into the primordial waters creating land. Then from the mud clay, he fashions the first humans.

So there is a diversity of beliefs

about creation, good and evil. It is hard to show a single theme out of the traditions about creation, but certainly, their views show a historical understanding of creation, and of competing forces of good and evil.

### **Great Spirit**

The First Nations tribes were largely hunters, and had little contact with each other. However, they did seem to share a common culture. They believed in the Great Spirit in the sky, the creator of the world. Although the creator was called Wakan Tanka by the Sioux, Manitou by the Algokin, and many other names, but His characteristics as the creator were common.

The following Blackfoot tribal prayer captures their concept of Mother Earth and the Father Spirit:

*Mother Earth, have pity on us  
and give us food to eat!*

*Father, the Sun, bless all our  
children and may our paths be  
straight!*

(Blackfoot prayer)

There are also beliefs about a dangerous underworld far away. Some tribes describe the under-

world as being across a river or ocean, again to signify that it is far away. Its evil connotations seem similar to our concept of Hell.

As with many ancient cultures without written traditions, it is easy to mistake their views as being based upon polytheism. In most native American beliefs, there is a single main creator Spirit, and then hierarchies amongst the created, some of whom seem to take on superhuman or supernatural traits.

### **Shamanism**

The concept of Shamans or Witch Doctors was quite wide-spread among the North American tribes. The term originates from Siberia and Mongolia from where many of the tribes are thought to have emigrated tens of thousands of years ago, and literally means 'he who knows'.

The Shamans (sometimes referred to as witch doctors) were thought to have a special link to the spirit world, and as these people held their ancestors in high regard, such a link carried significant social status with it. There are strange tales of Shaman being able to control the forces of nature and cure people, but actually their function was spiritual.

Often, the initiation rites for a Shaman were quite severe and brutal in order to determine whether the Shaman was of the right status, and to give him experiences to strengthen his ties with the spirit world. Some examples that we have include the Apache shaman candidates who would jump off a cliff, and those that survived were thought to have gained spiritual knowledge through their near-death experiences. Again, in the Sioux sundance, braves would have heavy needles fed through their chest and tied to buffalo skins. They would then dance, and the ritual would heighten their spiritual senses.

Whilst these seem crude, actually we are aware of people going through near-death experiences who have sensed their spirit leaving their body, or even had experiences where they have seen themselves on the operating table whilst sensing that their spirit was about to leave the body. The First Nations tribes would have been aware of such experiences, and this had led over centuries to the concept of the Shaman.

### **Totem Poles**

The tribes of the West coast often built Totem Poles. The term Totem



**Totem Poles in Vancouver**

comes from their term referring to their ancestors, so for example the Cree called their kin *ototema*, while the Ojibwa referred to them as *ototeman*. The Totem poles provided a link from the tribe to their ancestors, and animals that were associated to their tribes, and these collectively reminded them of their heritage, but also provided them protection according to their beliefs.

On the poles, they would carve people and animals to symbolise their beliefs, traditions and values, stories and adventures, accomplishments and significant members.

They would raise a totem in honour of a deceased but high profile clan

member of the tribe, or to commemorate a significant event. Some African tribes, also put up a smaller statue to commemorate their ancestors. So this appears to be a global phenomenon.

### **Moral Code**

The First Nations seem to have a strong sense of community, family, ancestors and tradition.

Many of the tribes use animal forms to convey messages about good and bad qualities. For example, the Coyote, a wild dog of North America (similar to the Fox) is shown to be selfish, greedy, sly and a trickster. The Owl on the other hand, represented wisdom and divination. In this way, tribes can convey messages about desirable and undesirable moral qualities.

The Huron tribe claim that they had a prophet called Deganawidah in the 16th century who united the Five Iroquois Nations (Seneca, Mohawk, Oneidas, Onondagas and Cayugas) located in modern New York state, and then taught a moral code to the tribes. (Gordon p.327). Deganawidah, whose name means ‘two river currents that flow together’ is claimed by some to have been born to a virgin mother,



**Canadian First Nations  
face masks**

although this has probably been influenced by the Christianity of the settlers who interviewed the natives to extract this story. It is likely that the mention of virgin birth was meant to convey that he was considered their prophet of a similar stature to Jesus<sup>(as)</sup>. Whatever his origins, he is known to have advocated peace among the hostile tribes, and encouraged them to come together into the confederation. He is also claimed to have eradicated past practices such as cannibalism. He was assisted in his mission by his disciple Hiawatha who originated from the Mohawk tribes.



There are also oral traditions passed down that capture some of the moral teachings and understanding of family responsibilities amongst some of the tribes as shown by the following two traditions:

*Do not abuse your wife. Women are sacred. If you make your wife suffer, you will die in a short time.*

(Winnebago Father Precepts)

*My dear sisters the women, you have had a hard life to live in this world, yet without you this world would not be what it is. Wakan Tanka intends that you should bear much sorrow - comfort others in time of sorrow. By your hands the family moves.*

(Sioux tradition)

So although there is no single written tradition and common moral code, there were several facets that were common such as respect for elders and family roles, and this would have gone hand in hand with their respect for the earth and nature.

### **Life after Death**

Many tribes believed that there is an evil underworld, although the link between bad behaviour and Hell is

not so obvious. Indeed, many tribes have beliefs related to reincarnation. Perhaps their fascination for ancestors is confused by analysts as a belief in reincarnation, and maybe what they are referring to is actually a rebirth in the next life, in a different world, and not a rebirth in this world.

According to the Sioux, after death, those members of the tribe that live good lives will be able to make their way to a better place, while those that are sinful will not be able to due to the weight of their sins. (Jordan, p.54)

There is a story of the Chinook tribe in which a Blue Jay takes his dead wife to be reborn in the Spirit People's village (Jordan p.228). So here, clearly the rebirth is in a different place, among the Spirit People. The Chinook have another story of the Thunderers adventures in the Land of the Spirit People to illustrate that the Spirit Land is not as frightening as people may think.

Concepts of the soul and spirit are more confused. There are very few clear concepts, and even in journeys to the underworld or Spirit Lands, there is no mention of a soul leaving its physical body. However, there

are tales such as the Sacred Bundle myth of the Pawnee tribe where a soul moves between creatures. According to the myth, a hunter marries a cow which has turned into a woman. She then leaves, and years later he identifies her as a different buffalo. Again, it is not clear what concept this myth is trying to illustrate beyond the fact that animals also have spirits, although it is not dissimilar to concepts of reincarnation from Asia.

### **Prophecies of the Latter Days**

It is easy to assume that these tribes have simple beliefs, not as intricate as our own. Yet the Hopi tribe have a very elaborate mythology about the different ages of man. They describe four ages of man, the first three destroyed by floods and other calamities such as fire. The Hopi survived the Great Flood and were given Stone Tablets (called Toponi) by the Great Spirit. They made a Covenant with the Spirit never to turn away from him.

The fourth and current age is expected to culminate in a war when the old countries, the first to receive the light of knowledge (perhaps pointers to the Middle East) will descend into warfare and a 'Gourd of Ashes' will fall to boil the ocean

and burn the lands.(Gordon p.339). Thank-fully, their story continues beyond this great war to a new safer and more enlightened dawn.

In this account of the Hopi, two things stand out. First, the reference to the Great Flood chimes with so many other traditions across the world about the flood. Secondly, the description of the great war clearly alludes to some form of atomic warfare.



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Despite the ease with which we can obtain debt and assume that it will be written-off if we do not repay, we must not forget our moral obligations as responsible citizens.

*Tanveer Khokhar – UK*

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### **The Holy Prophet's(saw) Nearness to God Almighty – Part 4**

Describes the spiritual journey and the heights reached by the Holy Prophet(saw) in his character as the recipient of the Holy Qur'an.

*Hadhrrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad(as)*

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### **Denmark Symposium**

The true teachings of Islam from the text of the Qur'an and the life of the Holy Prophet(saw) from an address delivered by the Head of the worldwide Ahmadiyya community.

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### **Rebuttal of Maududi Philosophy**

An analysis into the views of Maududi on Jihad and his Marxist use of force and how the same ideology was exploited by Orientalists.

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### **Christian-Muslim Dialogue and Criticism**

Inter-faith dialogue must be based on recognising and respecting differences and not recycling the same attacks on the founders of religions.

*Mansoor Ahmad Shah – UK*

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### **Prophets of God – part 1**

A brief introduction to some of the prophets of God beginning with Adam(as)

*Daud Hanif – USA*

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### **People of Lot(as)**

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### **Notes and Comments: Cartoon Wars**

The recent furore over the cartoon depicting the Prophet of Islam(saw) as a terrorist is as irresponsible as is the burning of foreign embassies and destruction of business by some Muslims.

*Basit Ahmad – UK*

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### **The Holy Prophet's(saw) – the Grand Reformer, Perfector of Morals and His Miracles – part 5**

These extracts show how someone who truly loves Muhammad(saw) writes about the Holy Prophet(saw) and expresses his superiority over all Prophets and the significance of his miracles.

*Hadhrrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad(as)*

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### **Prophets of God – part 2**

The Patriarch Prophet Abraham(as) whose progenies include Judaic prophets and Jesus(as) and the Ishmaelite branch left an indelible imprint on the future of mankind.

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### **The Purity of the Text of the Holy Qur'an**

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*Hadhrat Mirza Tahir Ahmad<sup>(ru)</sup>*

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