

Jesus as a Gulf and a Bridge in Christian-Muslim Understanding

Fr. Carl Chudy, SX

Introduction

Recently I heard an interesting podcast on *National Public Radio* entitled “[Hidden Brain](#).” It’s a marvelous program that attempts to show the unconscious patterns that drive human behavior, the biases that shape our choices, and the triggers that direct the course of our relationships. [This particular program](#) focused on the labels that are given to us by others, and how they shape our identity. This immediately connected to a blog post I wrote previously for a non-religious blog site called *Secular Spectrum*, entitled [See Me](#).¹ The jist of it all is that our labels, both biased and partially true, are never really capable of defining who we are in total, as we are always discovering more in the marvelous complexity and mystery our lives entail, that’s if we are curious enough. The same holds true, I think, for our images of Jesus.

The images of Jesus for both Christians and Muslims is in part finding labels that assist us in understanding the person of Jesus of history, the Christ identified by ancient Christians in the post-resurrection, the Muslim Jesus, and how we are all shaped by them. It is also a recognition of the limitations of these labels; their historical and theological slant couched in our religious and cultural differences. They give us a sense though that pushes us to dig further. The theological and spiritual exploration required to sift through the meaning of these images as they are in conversation with each other is crucial to any serious undertaking of interfaith dialogue between Christians and Muslims. The differences among these images are the most formative places we are formed.

In this essay I hope to underline the importance of these Christologies, both Christian and Muslim, that must be in dialogue, shaped through the distinctive lens of each other’s understanding of the liminal moments of Jesus’ life; his birth, his role as Rabbi and teacher, the end of his life on earth, and his role in the final culmination of the cosmos, what we Christians call the *Parousia*.² Finally, I hope to offer a few conclusions that raise up the importance of this Christological dialogue, that not only enriches our diverse ways of understanding Jesus, but also our important ties to each other as Muslims and Christians.

¹ Fr. Carl Chudy. “Secular Spectrum: See Me.” 12/11/17. [July 19, 2017] <<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/secularspectrum/2017/07/see-me/>>. [12/11/17].

² Ibid

Getting Bearings for Dialogue

The history of Christian Muslim understanding has been a long interfaith relationship of push and pull of both apologetics and dialogue, with a particular emphasis on polemics, carrying biases on both sides.³ For Christians historically, that bias was set in an understanding the Jesus of Islam is a poor copy of Christianity, suggesting that Muslims transferred features of Christ to Muhammad. Muslims would return that the Qur'anic Jesus is closer to the real Jesus and that Christians distorted the image of Jesus as *Christendom* reshaped Christianity.⁴ Despite this uncompromising history, things are changing enormously in the modern era. As Oddbjorn Leirvik states:

“Many Christians have made strenuous efforts to understand Islam from within and on its own terms. On the Muslim side, there is a growing awareness in many circles that Christianity has to be taken seriously on its own terms if there is ever to be a meaningful dialogue on doctrinal issues, including the image of Christ.”⁵

Kenneth Cragg suggests that it is quite possible to come to a deeper understanding of the Muslim Jesus in how they understand him in history, theology and faith.⁶ That said, the Qur'an pays more attention to the prophets of the *Tanakh* as precedence for the Prophet Muhammad, than to Christ. Although there is ample material in Islamic sacred writings and literature on the figure of Jesus. Also, Leirvick cautions that what the Qur'an says of Christ, it also says of Jews, Christians, and Jewish-Christian scriptures. As there is material in the Qur'an about Jesus, it is Muhammad who is the “seal of all the Prophets.” The miracle of the Qur'an surpasses all other previous miracles.⁷ It is within this framework of Islam itself that Jesus finds a home as a role model for all Muslims and a sign of the power and compassion of God.

The Miraculous Birth of Jesus

Both bridges and differences between Muslim and Christian understanding of Jesus begins with the figure of Mary, the mother of the *Messiah*. Mary is the example of the righteous. All Muslims, Sunnis, Shi'ites and Sufis find in Mary a

³ Oddbjorn Leirvik. *Images of Jesus Christ in Islam, 2nd Edition*. (London: Bloomsbury, 2010)1-2. Kindle Edition.

⁴ Leirvick, 1-2. Christendom began with Constantine's public affirmation of Christianity in the 4th century; engulfed both Eastern and, later, Western Europe; and then shaped the European colonies in the New World. It was Byzantine and Roman Catholic and (later) Protestant.

⁵ Leirvick, 3.

⁶ Leirvick, 4.

⁷ Ibid.

role model of piety and submission. In Ephesus there is a shrine to Mary that is a place of prayer and devotion for Muslims and Christians, Iranian women venerate statues of Mary as the pure ideal, apparitions of Mary have been reported in Cairo, and women pray through Fatima and Mary when in anguish. As Dr. Lucinda Mosher stated in her lecture on Mary, “Each faith community has the Madonna, but we have her somewhat differently.”⁸

In Christian sources, the birth of Jesus is given the most detail in the gospel of Luke, where Mary is swept into a dramatic host of events, from the annunciation with the Angel Gabriel, her visit to Elizabeth, the weary road to Bethlehem, and the dramatic birth in obscure circumstances. In the Qur’an, a great deal of space is given by God to the importance of *Maryam*, predominately in the *sura* named after her, Maryam, and in other *suras* as well. The birth of Jesus resembles the Lukan narrative. The annunciation of Maryam is shared in both the gospel and the Qur’an, in the “family of Imran,” and the *sura*, “Maryam.” Most importantly, the bridge of Mary with Maryam is a strong confirmation of the *virginity* of Mary.⁹ She says: “How can I have a boy when no man has touched me and am not an unchaste woman.” “How can this be, since I have no husband?”¹⁰ The purity and piety of Mary in both traditions resonate with each other.

The infancy narratives of Luke offer not an historical glimpse of that fateful moment, but a theological framework on the identity of Jesus as savior and redeemer. This literary device attempts to show what the birth of Jesus demonstrates about God’s plan for salvation and how Jesus himself expresses that desire. The theological connection between his birth and burial show how the whole paschal mystery is wrapped intimately into this Christmas story. The miraculous birth in both faith traditions demonstrate the power, mercy and compassion of God.

Islamic Christology identifies Jesus as *kalima*, the word. It is used three times in the Qur’an. He is a “Word from God”, confirmed by Yahya (John the Baptist). During the annunciation, Maryam is told: “Maryam, God give you news of a *Word from Him*, whose name will be the Messiah...”¹¹ There is yet another verse where Christians are asked to stop saying God is “three.” “God is only one.” It then explains what Messiah means to Muslims: “The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only the Messenger of God and His Word, which he cast into Mary, and a Spirit

⁸ Dr. Lucinda Mosher. *Mary in Christianity and Islam*. Video Lecture: <https://hartfordseminary.instructure.com/courses/182/modules/items/4434>

⁹ Mustafa Akyol. *The Islamic Jesus: How the King of the Jews Become a Prophet of the Muslims*. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2017) 114.

¹⁰ Qur’an 19:20 & Luke 1:34.

¹¹ Qur’an 3:45.

from Him.”¹² These differing views of Jesus are the framework for understanding his purpose, what he taught, and forms both the gulf and the bridge.

What Jesus Taught

David Kerr (1993) makes this observation: “...inter-religious dialogue is best advanced where, as a ‘dialogue’ of life or a ‘dialogue of deeds’, priority is given to ethics.¹³ It has been said by Muslims, if you want to know about Christianity and what Jesus taught, read the *Sermon on the Mount*. The first and longest of Jesus’ discourses is found in Matthew. Jesus as the “New Moses,” begins with eight beatitudes and ends with a clear call to obedience. Luke’s version is called Sermon on the Plains in the sixth chapter. This “ethical treatise” of Jesus is the eschatological proclamation of a kingdom of the present and future which demands a “higher righteousness” to be “perfect”. (5:48) It is also this call to righteousness and obedience to God from Jesus that resonates vividly with the Islam’s Jesus.

Islam contains the largest body of texts concerning Jesus in any non-Christian literary tradition. They comprise wisdom sayings, ethical discourses, and mystical writings. Tarif Khladi’s *The Muslim Jesus* is an astonishing collection of material about Jesus from the 8th century until the 18th century, circulated from Spain to China. In the early context of Islamic sayings on Jesus, he is an apocalyptic figure, and in the *Tales of the Prophets*¹⁴ he is a major force of ethics. Certainly, Christians were a strong presence in early Islam throughout Syria, Iraq, and Egypt and interaction with Christian images of Jesus were quite normal. Jesus is an exemplar of affection, tolerance, charity, humility, spirituality, and asceticism for all Muslims to imitate. This Jesus strongly resembles the Jesus of Matthew and Luke.¹⁵

The miracles of Jesus are also an area where both Muslims and Christians find significant connections. Mahmoud Ayoub asserts that Christians and Muslims, who reflect on the life of Jesus, come to a greater understanding of God’s will for all of humanity. The people of the book must come together (3:64) to comprehend the eternal word of God. In the Qur’an, miracles are “ayah”, divine signs. It can be within creation, or the Word of God itself, the Qur’an, revealed to humanity. Miracles here must have the purpose to speak to the needs of God’s people, and

¹² Qur’an 4:171.

¹³ Leirvik, 246.

¹⁴ Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi. *Tales of the Prophets*. (India, Academy of Islamic Research and Publications, 1979).

¹⁵ Dr. Lucinda Mosher. The Muslim Gospel. Video Lecture: <https://hartfordseminary.instruction.com/courses/182/modules/items/4460>

demonstrates God's power to reproach "our folly and arrogance."¹⁶ For Ayoub, the miracle of Jesus needs to be seen in this wider context of humanity's relationship with God. (3:33-34) Both Jesus and Mary symbolize the unity of the human family.¹⁷

The Conclusion of Jesus' Earthly Life

Mustafa Akyol's, *The Islamic Jesus*, detailed Qur'anic perspectives on the passing of Jesus from the earth. This passing of Jesus is not a major theological event in Islam, as the cross is only mentioned in passing. That said, he brings up the questions that arose out the idea that Jesus was substituted on the cross. The dominant opinion in Islam is that Jesus did not die on the cross, but rather another who looked like him. Another interpretation centered on the Qur'anic passage 4:157-158:

And [for] their saying, "Indeed, we have killed the Messiah, Jesus, the son of Mary, the messenger of Allah ." And they did not kill him, nor did they crucify him; but [another] was made to resemble him to them. And indeed, those who differ over it are in doubt about it. They have no knowledge of it except the following of assumption. And they did not kill him, for certain. Rather, Allah raised him to Himself. And ever is Allah Exalted in Might and Wise. 4:157-8

For some scholars who acknowledged the death of Jesus on the cross, this passage was seen in the context of a dispute with a group of Jews in Medina who slandered Mary and boasted of the killing of Jesus (*Also in a Talmudic tradition*). Thus, this interpretation maintains that it was not the Jews, but the Romans who killed Jesus. However it is understood, it is unambiguous that the theology of the cross cannot be reconciled with the Qur'an.¹⁸

The crucial differences in the understanding of Jesus' death for Muslims and Christians lies in the atonement theology of Christianity and the phenomena of "original sin" that burdens humanity. Not all Christians attest to this purpose of Jesus on the cross, but most probably do. The early Christian notion from St. Paul, that Christ is the first born of creation, was supplanted in the early church with an emphasis on sin and salvation. St. Augustine in particular formulated a doctrine of original sin in order to highlight the saving grace of God. By the 11th century, the

¹⁶ Mahmoud Ayoub. "The Miracle of Jesus: Muslim Reflections on the Divine Word," in *Christology in Dialogue*, eds. Robert F. Berkey & Sarah A. Edwards. (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1993), 222-223.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 227.

¹⁸ Akyol, 151-152.

need to explain the damage due to the sin of Adam and Eve became the principle reason for Jesus Christ. Salvation through Christ meant being rescued from a fallen world.

The redemption of Christ, although wholly different than the Islamic view, does hold a common thread with Islam in the figure of Adam, as Christ is considered the “new Adam,” healing the rift of original sin caused by his desire for forbidden knowledge. The Qur’anic account of Adam, often misinterpreted by non-Muslims as a distortion of the account of Genesis, shows Adam’s sin and repentance, and Iblis’ obstinacy as the start of the battle of good and evil in their descent to earth. Redemption, for Muslims, is when this battle is finally concluded with the divine victory of the good.¹⁹ Adam in the Qur’an is created from clay through the breath of God. Adam was “saved” because he received words from God. He knew the language that angels did not know. Adam then, for Islam, is not the first sinner, but the first prophet because with him revelation begins.²⁰

Jesus and Eschatology

Both Christianity and Islam have as part of their faith claims an eschatology. That is, the faith concerns of the end of the world and the ultimate destiny of all humanity, the cosmos, and the final judgment of individuals. Mystically, it implies the perfection of all humanity in perfect union with the Creator.

For Christians, the central figure of eschatology is Jesus Christ who lived, died, rose, and will return at the end of all things to “judge the living and the dead.” The final coming of the Christ is called the “Parousia” for Christians. Early Christianity expected the final day to be quite imminent, found in Paul’s letters (Corinthians 16:22) and 2 Peter 3:3-10. However, within a few decades Christians revised their expectations of the “final hour” far into the future.²¹

One of Islamic theology’s most important topics is eschatology, along with divinity, and prophethood. Like Christianity, it is also concerned with last things and the ultimate destiny of all humanity and the cosmos. The sources for this can be found in the Qur’an and hadith qudsi. The Mahdi (guided one) will appear as a sign of the end of times, but will also usher in a period of a renewed Islam. *Al-Dajjal* (the anti-Christ) will usurp power and be destroyed by the Mahdi, or Jesus. It is here that final judgment will occur.²²

¹⁹ Mahmoud Ayoub, 94

²⁰ Carl Chudy, SX. *Suffering and Redemption in the Abrahamic Faiths*. Material gleaned from a paper done in Spring 2017 for *Themes in the Qur’an and Bible* with Dr. Steve Blackburn, 4.

²¹ Dr. Lucinda Mosher. *Christian Eschatology*. Video Lecture: <https://hartfordseminary.instruction.com/courses/182/modules/items/4475>

²² Chudy, 6.

The distinction of Jesus' role in the final culmination of all things between both faith traditions, is found in a realized eschatology in Islam, in the ambiguous way the Qur'an treats the role of Jesus in order to make it possible for Muslims to make a more proper exercise of their free will and live their faith intentionally, without waiting for Mahdi or Jesus. There is one tradition that uses the descent of Jesus to earth in the final hour as method of contemplation in order to learn to become detached, particularly regarding the ascetical life.²³

The images of Jesus as savior and redeemer sees him as the central figure in redemption and judgment. The centrality of his life and teaching, the passion experienced on the hill of Golgotha, the resurrection from the dead, ascension into heaven and the bestowal of the power of the Holy Spirit on the fledgling group of Christ's followers becomes a mandate to "go into the world" until the final coming of Christ and the consummation of the world. Whereas in Islam, the role of Jesus is significant, but certainly not central. Their image of Jesus as prophet lies in the consummation of Allah's will in the "final hour."²⁴

Some Conclusions

This essay is an attempt to show the figure of Jesus as both a bridge and a gulf in Christian-Muslim understanding. I have attempted to show, through the depiction of Jesus in both Christian and Islamic sources, threads of convergence and of divergence concerning the identity of Jesus. The miraculous birth of Jesus shows interesting commonalities in the annunciation of Mary and her special role, both for Christians and Muslims. Their differences lie in the identity of Jesus as divine Son of God and savior of the world, and on the other hand, the messenger of God who was followed by Muhammad, the "Seal of the Prophets". In Islam he is "a Word of God." In Christianity, he is "the Word of God.

The teaching of Jesus centered around the gospel of Matthew's account of the Sermon on the Mount, with proclamations of righteousness and obedience to God resonate deeply in Islamic spirituality. Yet, Mona Siddiqui (1997) doubts a dialogue of Christologies can achieve much more than just a discussion on the nature and person of Jesus, and that Islam cannot affirm any Christian perspective in this dialogue.²⁵ Yet, Christology, as central it is to Christianity, also represents Islamic traditions that touch upon "anthropology, theology, and *ethics*."²⁶

²³ Dr. Lucinda Mosher, *Islamic Eschatology*. Video Lecture: <https://hartfordseminary.instruction.com/courses/182/modules/items/4477>

²⁴ Taken from my final posting in the 5th module of the course, *Reflections on Eschatology*.

²⁵ Leirvik, 221.

²⁶ Ibid, 222.

It is this ethics in particular that make this Christological dialogue so significant. Peoples of differing faiths, coming together in collaboration against some of the great cancers that afflict our communities and planet today are inspired by the teachings of Jesus as an important commitment for both Muslims and Christians. In fact, we are better together in these crucial ways we share the compassion of Christ, and of God. The inspiration of Christ to do good in the world can be concisely understood in the Golden Rule, present in some form in many faiths. To treat the other as you yourself would want to be treated is present in Islamic form in the *Kitab al-imam* (The Book of Faith): ‘No one of you will become faithful till he wishes for his brother what he likes for himself.’

Pope Francis accentuates this vital link of faith with dialogue in his Encyclical, *The Joy of the Gospel*:

“Interreligious dialogue is a necessary condition for peace in the world, and so it is a duty for Christians as well as other religious communities. This dialogue is in first place a conversation about human existence or simply, as the bishops of India have put it, a matter of “being open to them, sharing their joys and sorrows”. In this way we learn to accept others and their different ways of living, thinking and speaking. We can then join one another in taking up the duty of serving justice and peace, which should become a basic principle of all our exchanges. A dialogue which seeks social peace and justice is in itself, beyond all merely practical considerations, an ethical commitment which brings about a new social situation. Efforts made in dealing with a specific theme can become a process in which, by mutual listening, both parts can be purified and enriched. These efforts, therefore, can also express love for truth.” (250)

Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald, former president of the [Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue](#) at the Holy See gave an address at Trinity College in Washington DC that looks to dialogue for something even more, in addition to the collaborative efforts in justice and peace.

“Yet dialogue can go still further. A later document, "Dialogue and Proclamation" from 1991, notes that it may take the form of a sharing of spiritual values, a mutual witness to beliefs, an exploration of the riches of the respective spiritual traditions. In this way Christians and people of other religious traditions can help one another to deepen their religious commitment, to respond with greater sincerity to God's call.” (cf. No. 40).

The bridges and gulfs that are discovered in our dialogue is indeed a contemplative, listening gaze into the faith of others; their spiritual values, their witness to God, and the rich spiritual traditions that give us a sense that the mystery of God transcends us all. Time and patience reaps these rewards.

Finally, I understand completely the words of the good Archbishop in how he affirms that our distinguishing religious commitment is actually deepened in dialogue with the religious other. Dialogue in the context of Jesus, notwithstanding our differences, has brought a wider, more expansive vision of Christ for me that begins in traditional Christian ecclesiology, but transcends it, toward the *Cosmic Christ* that ties us irrecoverably across faith and cultural boundaries, that frames our lives in vital connection to all creation, and indeed, to the entire cosmos itself. It is ever spiraling out with new opportunities to be assumed into the Mystery of God that transcends all religious difference, to be fellow seekers to the Truth of God. He goes on to say:

"The fullness of truth received in Jesus Christ does not give individual Christians the guarantee that they have grasped that truth fully. In the last analysis truth is not a thing we possess, but a Person by whom we must allow ourselves to be possessed. This is an unending process. While keeping their identity intact, Christians must be prepared to learn and receive from and through others the positive values of their traditions" ("Dialogue and Proclamation," 49).

MEDITATION ON SOTERIOLOGY

The poet is in labor.

_____ —Denise Levertov

_____ I confess the obvious, my inadequacy to translate
famine to bread to feed all the hungry children on earth.
Wish I could invent a happiness machine or dollar tree
blossoming with nontaxable revenue for small businesses.
Wish for a thousand bitcoins, wild doves of aqueous tongues,
non-walled paradises of flora and flame, psalms of untilled
ardor, testimonies on fevered inkstone. Inner voice says,
Aren't you asking whether there is a soul
_____ or whether souls may be saved?

Wish I could do more than arrange inklings into lines,
whisper God's love into our millennial vanity as labor.
Wish I cobbled heels of solace at funerals for mothers.
In a vision, Jesus is younger than I am now, bleeding
on iron pikes driven to bone. See a letter in the shape
of a T-square, pin on pin. Wonderful how he fulfills
his divine assignment, what he is called to do. Night
drops like a black lily—
_____ the labor is finished.

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