

Christ in Islam and Christianity, by Neal Robinson.  
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reviewed by Rev. Bassam M. Madany

Islam has engaged the attention of Christians ever since its rise early in the seventh century. One obvious reason is the fact that most early Muslim conquests took place within Christian lands. The people of the Book, as Jews and Christians were called, were given the choice to Islamize or remain in their own religions. Those who made the second choice often gave a reason for this decision. They could not forsake the Messiah as revealed in Holy Scripture. Thus, from the beginning of the Christian-Muslim encounter, the main debate centered on the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Neal Robinson, a Senior Lecturer in Religious Studies, at the College of St. Paul and St. Mary, England, has authored a critical study on the topic of Christ in Islam and Christianity. This subject is just as relevant today as it was fourteen hundred years ago. Both Christians and Muslims need to know exactly what they believe and where their differences are. How did these differences arise and how have they been understood by the adherents of the two faiths? Mr. Robinson does not claim to offer a definitive answer, he simply shares with us the fruits of his research over a period which covered the decade of the eighties. He consulted both original Arabic sources as well as Western works in several European languages.

The result is a thorough study of 'Isa (the Qur'anic name of Jesus) as depicted in the Muslim sacred book and as expounded in the standard classical commentaries of Sunni and Shi'ite Islam. Furthermore, the author shares with us a summary of some of the traditional Christian interpretations of the reason for this unbridgeable gap which separates the Biblical Jesus from the Qur'anic 'Isa.

Every chapter in the book (their total being seventeen) ends with a summary under the heading of DISCUSSION. It is intended to exhibit a provisional conclusion of the complex subject treated in the chapter. For example, chapter three ends with these words:

"Despite our extensive knowledge of Byzantine Orthodoxy and of the principal forms of Christianity which flourished in Syria and Persia, we know all too little about Christianity as practised in Najran and Abyssinia in the seventh century and even less about Arab tribal Christianity. The external evidence and the evidence of the Qur'an itself both point to a predominantly heterodox influence on the early environment of Islam. Although the external evidence would favour Nestorianism and Monophysitism, the internal evidence is equally indicative of some form of Jewish Christianity. We should probably think in terms of a variety of rival sects some of which may have vanished without trace."

Professor Robinson's research is concentrated on these basic teachings relating to the person and work of the Messiah as depicted in the Qur'an and in the classical Islamic commentaries on the Qur'an: Jesus' Return: (Qur'an 4:159), the Crucifixion, the Miracles and the Virginal Conception.

In none of these areas do the teachings of Islam approximate the statements of the Bible which emphasize the redemptive character of the mission of the Messiah, his uniqueness and his finality. In his Postscript, the author summarizes his research with these incisive words:

"The classical commentaries represent Jesus in a manner which is fairly constant and it makes little difference whether their authors are Sunnites or Shi'ites. The Qur'anic picture is fused with that of the 'authentic' ahadith [traditions] which refer to Jesus' future descent to kill the Antichrist and which relativise the Qur'anic statement about God's choice of Mary. The commentators are unanimous in accepting the literal truth of the virginal conception and of the miracles which the Qur'an ascribes to Jesus but they interpret them as proofs of his prophethood, not of his divinity. They are also unanimous in maintaining that Qur'an 4:157 denies that Jesus was crucified. They generally assume that this aya [verse] is best understood in the light of the traditions which describe how Jesus' semblance was projected onto someone else while he himself was raised bodily into heaven - or to be more precise into the third heaven where Muhammad encountered him on his night journey."

What is refreshing about "Christ in Islam and Christianity" is the thoroughgoing scholarship which is evident on every page. The author does not pretend to find materials in the Qur'an or the vast Islamic exegetical works which might support any claim that these Islamic sources teach anything akin to what the Bible says about the Christ. Some Christian apologists both in the past and at present, have sought to "enlist" the Qur'an in order to "prove" a Christian point of view. They should take to heart the closing words of this work:

"At their worst, Christian apologists who force their interpretation on the Qur'an remind me of the agents of the Reconquista who built their cathedral in the heart of the mosque of Cordoba. At their best, Christian historians who detect elements of Christian provenance embedded in the Qur'an are more like skilled archaeologists who have unearthed vestiges of Constantinople beneath the surface of Istanbul. They know that Aya Sofya Camii [pronounced: jami'i] was once a Christian church but that it could not be 'restored' merely by removing the minarets with which it is now adorned. Its 'meaning' is now inextricably bound up with the many splendid Ottoman buildings which surround it on every side."

On the global scene where both Muslims and Christians rub shoulders and many are citizens of the same realm, it is imperative that they learn how to freely express their beliefs without either side being forced to keep silence for fear of persecution. If pluralism is to be genuine and not used merely for propagandistic purposes, Christians living in Muslims lands and Muslims living in "Christian" lands should enjoy equal rights and privileges. This entails the right to freely verbalize what they believe as well as to embrace the faith one's conscience compels him to adopt. Neal Robinson's book appears at a timely moment in history when old empires have vanished and when people everywhere should learn to live in peace notwithstanding the real differences in their beliefs.