

Jesus in the Qur'an by Geoffrey Parrinder.  
Rockport, MA: Oneworld Publications, 1995. Pp. 187. \$13.95 (paper)

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According to the Muslim faith, there are three heavenly (theistic) religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. All three faiths affirm the unity of God, his transcendence and his involvement in the world which he created. While these similarities are important, there are major differences between them, especially when we compare Christianity with Islam. The greatest disagreement is in the way these two religions regard the person and the work of Jesus Christ.

Jesus in the Qur'an, is a new title dealing with this important topic. The author, Geoffrey Parrinder, is Professor Emeritus of the Comparative Study of Religions at the University of London. In the Introduction, Professor Parrinder states that "... the encounter of the world religions is a major fact of our times and it demands a restatement of traditional theological expression. This restatement must take account of all the new knowledge available." (p. 14) As we are informed that "the present writer has often disagreed with some of the theological views of Dr Hendrik Kraemer..." (who had championed in his days the uniqueness and finality of Jesus Christ,) we are alerted to look for such disagreements. They will become evident when we reach the conclusion of the study.

Fifteen chapters are devoted to a thorough investigation of the Qura'nic references to such topics as Jesus, Names of Jesus, Mary, The Birth of Jesus, Works of Jesus, The Death of Jesus, Son of God, Trinity and Gospel. Of the total 114 Surahs (Chapters) of the Qur'an, fifteen make mention of Jesus or refer to him. While Professor Parrinder quotes at length from these chapters and gives us his own interpretations, yet he constantly refers to the expositions of the great Muslim exegetes such as Razi, Baidawi, Tabari, Ibn Ishaq, Bukhari, Biruni and Ibn Khaldun. This is important to keep in mind. Actually, no "new" reading of the Qur'an is possible without reference to the works of the classical expositors. Their commentaries are still recognized as authoritative by present-day Muslims.

The reader is almost overwhelmed by the painstaking work of Professor Parrinder in his gathering of all the Qur'anic texts relating to his subject and thus allowing the student of Islam to study the primary source of this faith. For this time-consuming labor, we are deeply indebted to the author. But when we actually assess his interpretation of the subjects mentioned in his book, we cannot but become alarmed.

For example, in the chapter which deals with Jesus Christ as Prophet (nabi), Parrinder posits a polarity between the primitive Christian understanding of the role of the sufferings of Jesus and that of Gentile Christianity whose theology "was determined more by faith in the resurrection than by the memory of the sufferings of the Cross." (p. 37) Quite often, the author displays a rather facile acceptance of higher critical views of the Biblical text. Thus he writes in the chapter on The Annunciation, "The Magnificat is no doubt a later hymn, whether attributed either to Mary or Elizabeth,

but it has no mention of an unusual birth." This quotation, as well as many others, manifest a low view of the inspiration of the Christian Scriptures. In the chapter on the Words of Jesus, we come across this statement, "But that the Holy Spirit comes in later messengers cannot be denied." (p. 100) A similar assertion regarding special revelation beyond the Bible is found in the chapter on Trinity, "So God was revealed in his essential nature of love in Christ, but he is revealed in other ways in nature and in other faiths." (p. 140)

When Professor Parrinder sums up the results of his research in the last chapter, Conclusion, his irenic spirit is very evident. Equally his desire to re-write the tenets of Christianity in order to make inter-faith dialogue a fruitful enterprise on the global scene. Any forthright statement which is part of the accepted Christian tradition regarding the substitutionary nature of Christ's death on the cross, is deplored. "There is no doubt that Christians hold firmly to the Cross as a historical fact, but they are not bound to accept theories that would interpret it in terms of legal satisfaction or sacrificial substitution." (p. 169) But what about the words of Philip addressed to the Ethiopian in which Isaiah 53 became the starting point for the preaching of the gospel? And how are we to understand Paul's words in I Corinthians 15, "For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures"? Are these words to be reinterpreted so as to make them acceptable to Muslims?

When we reach the end of the Conclusion, we are "challenged" to engage in a radical reappraisal of the fundamentals of the Christian faith.

"It is too easily assumed that all traditional doctrines are firmly based on the Bible. The Semitic view of God may need to be cleared of some Greek theories that have overlaid it. ... Terms like Son of God, Trinity and Salvation need to be re-shaped and given new point. Concepts of prophecy, inspiration and revelation must be re-examined in view of the undoubted revelation of God in Muhammad and in the Qur'an." (p. 173)

Such an agenda belongs to a genre of pluralistic theology which seeks to "reconcile" Christianity, a redemptive religion, with Islam, a faith which is fundamentally legalistic. This may appear both possible and realistic to some Western theologians. However, a Christianity which parts company with the ecumenical creeds of the early church, is anemic and will eventually disappear. Furthermore, it is very important for all Western pluralists to realize that their attempts to reinterpret Christianity in order to make it acceptable to the followers of other religions are not reciprocated from the other side. In my study of Arabic sources which have been preoccupied during this century with the challenge of "tahdith" (modernization) and "tajdid" (renewal) of Islam, modernizing Muslim intellectuals are engaged in heroic efforts to reconcile the Islamic worldview with modernity. But no responsible Muslim modernizer has manifested any desire to depart from the historic Islamic belief in the authority and finality of the Qur'an as God's last word to mankind or the uniqueness of the person and mission of Muhammad, the seal of the prophets. These two areas of "iman" (faith) are not negotiable to Muslims. Thus the hope of Western pluralist theologians to "sell" their agenda globally is unrealistic and is bound to fail.

Within the global pluralistic scene in which many of the followers of the world religions find themselves as neighbors, what is needed is respect and toleration of one another. Certainly Christians must exert themselves to learn about the beliefs of other faiths, but that endeavor should not be marked by diminishing their allegiance to "the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints."

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