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Interpreting the Scriptures of Islam and Implications for the West

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Abstract: The paper will explore scriptural evidence in the Islamic tradition which has capacity to fortify dialogue with the West on the basis of the notion of a common tradition existing between Islam and the major religious traditions of the West. This common tradition will focus not only on the central Abraham legends and lineage but on recently revived evidence of the strong role played by the 'Muslim Jesus' in the early inspiration of Islam. At the same time, this evidence will be unveiled as the cause of much of the misunderstanding and tension that exists between Islam and Judaism and Christianity in particular. The role of the work of the Tunisian scholar, Mohamed Talbi, will be central to the thesis being put in the paper that the common tradition has greater potential for unity than disunity.

Keywords: Islam, Judaism, Christianity, Scripture, Evidence, Heritage

Introduction

ISLAM HAS CLEARLY become one of the globe's most potent forces with the capacity to re-shape human society as we know it, and so our motivation to understand it is naturally enhanced. Our sources of knowledge are also much improved on the past, with new and friendlier translations and explanations of the Qur'an, as well as a rash of scholarship among Western educators attempting to understand Islam (cf. Nettler 1995, Kramer 1999, Armstrong 2000, Peters 2003, Rogerson 2003). Of even greater significance, however, is the fact that we now have available to us a renewed Islamic scholarship directed at understanding and/or re-interpreting its own scriptural evidence, including how this evidence directs its relationship with the broader world of religion and especially with Judaism and Christianity (cf. al-Ashmawi [in Nettler 1995], Talbi 1995, Tantawi & al-Fattah Tabbara [in Nettler & Taji-Farouki 1998], Nasr 2002). This work cuts both ways in terms of building or destroying bridges with Islam but, either way, it is vital work for Jews, Christians and Muslims themselves, and indeed the entire global community, to know, understand and have informed views about.

Interpreting the Scriptures Positively

One of the most important contemporary Islamic scholars is the Tunisian, Mohamed Talbi. Talbi (1995) argues that all revealed religion is equal in status so long as it is faithful to its essential charter to be a spiritual and ethical force, rather than a political one. On this basis, there can be no inherent claims towards exclusivity or singular pathways to salvation. In the face of much Islamic scholarship of the day, Talbi writes:

... the dialogue with all men of all kinds of faiths and ideologies is from now and onwards strictly and irreversibly unavoidable. Man has never lived in isolation, and man's history may be considered as an irreversible process of an unceasingly extending communication. Man's fulfillment is in community and relationship. And this is written in the Qur'an: 'O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other ... If this can be admitted ... we can think of the whole of mankind as a brotherly 'community of communities' – or God's Family as the Hadith states – in which everyone has the right to be different, to be accepted, and fully respected in his chosen differences. (p. 61)

Talbi's quest is to re-establish the ethics of tolerance and inter-faith dialogue that, for him, lie at the heart of the tradition and are also the key to Islam's ongoing relevance in a pluriform world. Islamic scholarship of Talbi's species is what Western scholarship and education at all levels must engage with seriously in order to challenge the relative ease with which a negative agenda has been rolled out and become the stereotypical Islam for many Westerners. Without serious scholarship that creates a bridge between more inclusivist Islamic interpretations and similarly ecumenical views among non-Muslims, the Talbis of this world are left without support at either end, and their views eventually crumble against the combined tide of spawning militaristic exclusivism within Islam and forms of anti-Islamic prejudice found commonly today in the non-Muslim world.

The theology of a Talbi, therefore, with its capacity to interpret anew the most sacred of Islamic



texts, is of profound importance to Islam and to a world challenged by Islam. At the heart of the importance lies the foundational perspective that the revelation given to Muhammad was inherently about the establishment of radical forms of social justice, such that tolerance, equity and charity were essential to the ideology and, therefore, necessary artefacts to the community that would spring up in its name. Furthermore, Talbi's theology is vital to those whose commitment is to an Islam that can only be understood as an inextricable part of the tripartite 'People of the Book' tradition, to Judaism, Christianity and Islam as a mutually inclusive trinity of semitic monotheism and all that it has spawned.

Ronald Nettler (1999) writes of Talbi:

The Qur'an, as basis and foundation of the whole structure, is Talbi's ultimate source. He sees in his theory of pluralism a 'modern' idea from the depths of revelation. Despite his obvious debt to modern thought, Talbi's point of departure is from within the sacred text and its early historical context. His approach to that text and history presupposes there is a humanistic message of the Golden Rule and an empirical validity in historical sources such as the constitution of Medina which support that message. (p. 106)

Nettler's reference to the constitution of Medina provides one of the clues to the importance of the theological connection with Judaism and Christianity and to the practical importance of Islam for those Jews and Christians who wish to re-visit and understand the essential inspiration of their own origins, in other words, to come to new knowledge of self through knowing the other. The clue provided by Nettler is about the reforming agency role of Islam; it is about the highly contentious issue of Islam as a practical social reform including, at least in part, its role as a reformer of Judaism and Christianity. Amidst the great traditions of reformation within both Judaism and Christianity, and indeed as part of their relationship with each other, these two religions might consider Islam as a reformation of both of them. Karen Armstrong (2000), one of the world's leading authorities on Islam and its relationship with the West, is adamant in her assertion that Muhammad was not so concerned to found a new religion as to renew the old faith in the one true God, and to bring to fulfillment his Promise to Abraham to build a new nation as a light to the nations of the world. Herein are clues about the positive interpretation of the relationship between the three religions, powerful clues for those Jews and Christians wishing to re-visit their own traditions.

The reference to Medina is to the kind of *Ummah*, or community, that Islam first established around the

belief that it was the light to the nations, that model community that God had wanted to establish in his name. It was this conception of the Islamic *Ummah* as the true 'People of God' that would go on to inspire the great Islamic civilizations that spawned from northern Africa to Spain and beyond. Remarkable among their characteristics, granted the benchmarks of the day, was the practice of ethnic and religious tolerance. Also remarkable were their social welfare systems, attempts at universal education and healthcare and, possibly most contentiously, their approach to women's equality issues. Around a thousand years before the so-called Enlightenment in the West began the move towards these features, they were part and parcel of early Islamic civilizations and for many Muslim apologists, they continue to be the defining features of an authentic Islam (cf. Ozalp, 2004; Yahya, 2002). In trying to determine why this is so, we gain important insight into the vital relationship with the inspirational worlds of Judaism and Christianity.

The ethic of ethnic and religious tolerance was practised by Muslims essentially because of their strong belief that Islam truly was the fulfilment of God's ancient Promise to establish a model community in the midst of the nations. This would be a community that would reflect God's deep desire that humankind should live in peace and practise forms of personal integrity and social justice. This would be the community that would show the rest of the world how to live well and under God.

For Muhammad, it was Islam that finally took up the challenge to be this community, this *Ummah* of Allah. Inspired in part by both Moses and Jesus, Muhammad went on to establish the community that, it would seem, he saw as essential to the core of both Judaism and Christianity. Armstrong (2000) seems clear that it was part and parcel of being Muslim that one should have a profound understanding that Judaism and Christianity were sibling religions in their common commitment to the prophetic interpretation of the Promise.

As with ethnic and religious tolerance, social welfare was not there merely by chance. Muhammad had taken to heart the message of the ancient Jewish prophets and Jesus that God did not want sacrifice and ritual but justice and mercy that flowed like a river. As a result, we find in the Islamic *Ummah* a practical social welfare scheme of tithing that saw everyone giving a percentage of their goods to the community. Similarly, education was considered crucial as a religious as well as a social duty. Religiously, it was important because Muhammad had understood the censures of the prophets, including Jesus, about the leaders of the people establishing their own power on the back of the disadvantage of others. So, education, especially about religious

knowledge and law, was important in the early Islamic communities. Arguably, the model imam of early Islam, Abu al-Ghazzali, cited the views of Muhammad himself in suggesting:

The learned are the heirs of the prophets ... the best of people is a believing learned man who does good ... a learned man is a trust of God on earth ... God has not given any man more excellence than the knowledge of religion. (al-Ghazzali 1991, 15-17)

In the view of al-Ghazzali, one of the reasons that Muhammad was so committed to education was to ensure that there would be no religious elite, no groups which could use their religious knowledge to lord it over the uneducated, as he saw in both Judaism and Christianity.

In arguably the most inspired scriptural evidence of a positive kind, at least in relation to Islam and Christianity, we find the so-called 'Muslim Jesus' texts to be found largely in the *Hadith*, texts attributed to some of Islam's most reliable early scholars, including al-Ghazzali himself. Texts like these show the extent to which Islam relied on its 'love affair', as Khalidi (2001) describes it, with Jesus and the entire Christian story, at least in its pristine form. Muhammad crafted Islam, at least in part, around the ideals he found in Judaism and Christianity, and early Islam utilized much from within the broader scriptural worlds of Judaism and Christianity in extending the crafting of Islamic civilizations. Between them, the texts of the *Isra'iliyat*, those 'stories of the prophets' that became part of early Islam's folklore largely through the influence of Jewish converts, together with the texts of the Muslim Jesus, represent the strength of the relationship between the three siblings. On the one hand, this illustrates the fairly well known fact that both Judaism and Christianity were instrumental in the inspiration and origins of Islam; on the other hand, however, is the less heralded but potentially more significant point that Islam's capacity to re-engage both Jews and Christians with their own origins has only just begun to tickle the imagination.

In this regard, the 'Muslim Jesus' texts, otherwise known as the 'Muslim Gospel' is a case in point. According to Camilla Adang (1996), this Gospel relies heavily on the non-canonical texts of Christianity, on "... apocrypha, pseudepigrapha, and midrashim, rather than canonical scripture."⁽³⁾ As such, the Muslim Gospel has potential to play a particularly significant role in Christianity's long-held desire to re-discover the historical Jesus beyond the Christ of their faith, so heavily interpreted by historico-political events beyond those pertaining merely to Christianity's primal inspiration. These are the kinds of benefits of open inter-faith dialogue

and mutual discovery that Talbi sees as essential to the communities of revealed religion and in which he sees Islam playing a particularly contributive role.

Sadly, the times seem to be working against the ecumenism of a Talbi. The very scriptures that have so much potential to unite are increasingly being seen as an insidious force within Islam that has to be extricated in order to establish a form of 'radical Islam'. This re-assessment of the roles played by Judaism and Christianity, and the interrelationship of their scriptures with Islamic scriptures, presents one of the most urgent challenges faced by those Muslims and non-Muslims who, like Talbi, believe in the positive interpretation.

Interpreting the Scriptures Negatively

Much of the current trend in Islam to depict 'the West' and especially Judaic and Christian forces negatively can be traced to the so-called Christian Crusades of the 11th to 13th centuries. Elisseeff (1993) shows how the likes of Nur al-Din, leader of the first effective Islamic counter-attack after the fall of Jerusalem, and Ibn al-Athir, the thirteenth-century historian, turned around earlier ecumenical conceptions so effectively, while at the same time actually using the Crusades as a model for Muslims to follow. This so-called 'Western Jihad' provided the template for all future conceptions of *Jihad* as '*Da'wa*' (Holy War), while the calls to zealous murder and martyrdom offered to the Crusaders by the likes of Pope Urban II and Saint Bernard of Clairvaux provided explicit models for later Islamic terrorism.

Fuelling these antipathies further is a raft of medieval and modern Islamic scholarship which argues that the destruction of the original *Ummah* by the Crusaders happened as a punishment by God for Muslims tolerating Jews and Christians in their midst in the first place (cf. Nusse 1993). Sections of the *Qur'an* are brought forward to illustrate that such compromise was always against God's explicit will and that such must never happen again. This re-interpretation of past events does not stop with the Crusades. For some modern Islamic scholars and agitators, the entire history of the tradition dating back to Abraham is re-interpreted in light of recent events, including the re-establishment of Israel in 1948 (otherwise described variously as 'the Second Crusade', or more accurately the 'Ninth Crusade') and even more recent events that have seen the so-called Christian West in global conflict with the forces of Islam.

As illustrated, one version of the Judaeo-Christian conspiracy theory is wrapped in the language of 'Crusade', while another, equally acerbic language centers on the notion of 'Zionism'. The European Jews who migrated to Palestine in the latter part of

the nineteenth century used the title freely. As such, it became associated with the notion of invasion and of ideological threat to Islam. It therefore became an appropriate way in which revisionist history could interpret earlier empire-building on the part of the Jews (and Christians).

According to this view, there are seen to be three great Zionist establishments. The first is represented by the ancient kingdoms of Judah and Israel built at the expense of the original ancestral Muslim inhabitants and on an inauthentic interpretation of the Promise. The second Zionism is seen in the events of the Crusades and the plundering of Islamic civilization and spirituality. While the Christians are the obvious perpetrators this time, nonetheless the Jews are implicated as part of the grand Judaeo-Christian Conspiracy. The third Zionist episode then becomes the establishment of the modern state of Israel on May 14, 1948, achieved largely in the face of explicit failure to appease the Arab (largely Muslim) majority in Palestine. Against events like this, one can easily imagine how one with a conspiracy theory of the sort described above is likely to interpret the events of the Afghanistan and Iraq invasions of the early 2000s. The fact that the invaders with troops on the ground were the old largely Christian foes, and that those being invaded were mainly Muslim, does nothing to soften the conspiracy theory, nor dampen the more violent interpretation placed on the notion of *Jihad* since the 'Western Jihad' of the medieval Crusades (cf. Shatzmiller 1993).

In our own time, the heritage of all this has been in the creation of unusually hostile forms of radical Islam to be found in groups like Palestinian HAMAS, at least in its pre-political phase. The ideology of HAMAS has been typical of forces to be found as part of the modern terrorist front that employ Islam as inspiration and ultimate cause. HAMAS plugs into age-old prejudices against the West and, in particular, Israel and the USA. Its spiritual arm, found typically in the sentiments of its fallen sacred hero, Yassin, has utilized scripture, including sections of the *Qu'ran* to 'prove' that it is forbidden for any Muslim to so much as maintain friendly relations with non-Muslims, said to be the so-called 'unbelievers' of the *Qur'an*. In contrast to earlier interpretations, the fact that Jews and Christians are fellow 'People of the Book' does not exclude them from being 'unbelievers'.

Nusse (1993) employs a HAMAS Newsletter from the early 1990s to illustrate the spirituality that underpins the organization. In it, Jews are cast as unbelievers who attract God's anger for their attempts to destroy the original Ummah, referring apparently to the resistance that Muhammad experienced from the Jews of Medina. The reason that Jews are said to have been opposed to the Ummah from the beginning

is that Islam represented the "... new international force bringing an authentic civilizing and godly programme to mankind." (p. 102) Muslims are warned not to take Jews or Christians as friends because they are "... friends only for each other." (p. 104)

The uncompromising goal of HAMAS is the establishment of an Islamic state in Palestine:

For the Islamists, the question of Palestine is ... pre - eminent in shaping the future of the Islamic Ummah ... Control over Palestine announces control over the whole world ... the only means to reach the proclaimed goal ... is Jihad ... The link between Jihad and the purification of Muslim society is founded in the necessity of Islamic consciousness, and widens the notion of Jihad beyond simply military conflict. Intellectual elites are called to contribute ... by writing books and articles. (Nusse 1993, 109-113)

In this context, one of the key intellectual contributors is Muhammad al-Ashmawi, Professor of Letters at Alexandria University. His work (cf. Nettler 1995), on the surface seemingly more moderate than many of his peers, actually has potential to constitute the most negative interpretation of all. He appears to base his case on the need for Islam to rid itself of its political face and return to its true spiritual roots. While blaming Judaeo-Christian influence for infecting Islam with its current political agenda, he appears to exonerate Jews and Christians on the basis that they do not have the benefit of the final manifestation that God revealed to Muhammad in Islam. For al-Ashmawi, this revelation to the Prophet was the final proof that God's only interest was in a spiritual rather than politicized Ummah.

Because Jews and Christians do not have the benefit of this manifestation, they can be forgiven for clinging to their more primitive interpretations. He draws a heavy line between Islam and Judaism in particular, in declaring that the latter was never intended to be more than the legislative and institutional force that many Muslims see today. While not blaming Jews and, by inference, Christians personally, he nonetheless relegates their religions to such an inferior status that it becomes inconceivable that they could have anything positive to offer to Islam. Hence, the entire history of Jewish and Christian influence on Islam is re-interpreted as being regrettable and in need of urgent redressing.

In trying to explain what has gone wrong with Islam and why it is imperative that Muslims unite to return Islam to its true roots, al-Ashmawi is quoted as saying:

Isra'iliyat is ... the 'Israelite thought' which entered Islam in spite of its being completely alien to Islam ... Islamic thought has most certainly followed in the footsteps of Judaism, without being aware of the differences between the essence of Moses's mission and the essence of Muhammad's mission ... and that the former is a legislating mission and the latter a mission of mercy and ethics ... Confusing the foundation of the two missions and directing Islam in the way of Judaism is to alter the basis and nature of (the Islamic) mission, to corrupt it, and to repudiate it in order to make it adopt the colouration of the Isra'iliyat and the forms of Judaism. (Nettler 1995, 179-181)

The problem with Islam is, therefore, its 'Judaization', a problem that goes back to Islam's foundations when it allowed the foreign influences of Judaism and Christianity to sully its mission. While one does not find the kind of vilification in al-Ashmawi that one finds in so much revisionist Islamic scholarship of the day, nonetheless there are none who revise the orthodox history more dramatically. Under al-Ashmawi, even some of Islam's own traditional sacred heroes are effectively written out of the script. The inevitable logic would seem to be that, along with the entire prophetic tradition and certainly the Muslim Gospel, the influence of Moses and Jesus is rejected. They become little more than unwitting functionaries responsible for wholly imperfect religious forms. One could only conclude that they, along with their imperfect traditions, must be expunged from Islamic thought and tradition if Islam is to return to its allegedly 'true roots'. Under the

guise of an apparently moderate and non-punitive re-assessment of the history, al-Ashmawi has actually provided the theological rationale for the obliteration of Islam's long-held-to-be siblings, be it in terms of revisionist history or political solutions for today. For those who want to take it so far, he provides the perfect justification for the extermination of the modern state of Israel and for wholesale *Jihad* against the West.

Conclusion

These Islamic views, both positive and negative, are challenging to those whose faith is wrapped around the traditions of Judaism or Christianity, as well as to all Westerners. These views, however, are held by millions, including many who inhabit Western lands like the USA, Australia, the UK and Europe, which have largely been formed under the inspiration of Jewish and Christian beliefs and values. It is incumbent upon these nations that scholarship deal seriously with these views, sensitively with their commonalities but robustly and boldly with their differences. The pay off from such a quest is at least twofold. First, it has potential to educate the Westerner into greater understanding of the close interplay between the history and traditions of the three great religions, and especially of the mighty role that Islam has played in the development of Western thought and its priorities. Second, it has potential to assist in unravelling the causes of the current stand-off and steady decline in understanding and good will between powerful forces within Islam and the West. Hopefully, this would provide firmer footings for dialogue and collaboration in the future.

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My major research work and interest has centred on dialogue, encounter and movement within and between the major religions and new spiritualities. Funded project work has centred particularly on the impact on minority religious groups of multicultural and multi-faith settings. Work has focussed especially on Hindu and Islamic populations in Australia. I am a lifetime member of the Sri Venkateswara Hindu Temple Community of Sydney and have received an award for my academic contributions to dialogue from the Gallipoli Islamic Community of Sydney.

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