

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful

Muslim Passion for Christ

By Ibrahim N. Abusharif

Like everyone else, I was warned about the blood and violence, and braced for it. But the bit about the English subtitles must have slipped my mind. One unexpected thing I got out of watching "The Passion of the Christ" is its affirmation that Jesus never uttered the word "God." Instead, he called upon the Creator using a name that is very close to what I and other Muslims often evoke, namely, the word "Allah." (The Aramaic word for God is transliterated as "alaha.")

In a broad sense, "The Passion," as well as the controversy that stalks it, is an extension of the very long struggle for narrative control over the life and mission of Jesus. We, the American public, are given the impression that the discussion about the movie and its main character is a discourse between folks on both sides of a curious hyphen in the Judeo-Christian ambit, with Rabbis and Jewish intelligentsia expressing their fears that the movie will inspire anti-Semitism and with Christians denying that.

The irony here is that Muslims are perfectly poised to offer a view that no one seems to be talking about. What "The Passion" depicted in chilling imagery is but one narrative among several about Christ. In fact, Gibson portrayed one "canonized" narrative of Christ (only 12 hours of it) that received approval some centuries after the Messiah had lived and one that does not enjoy consensus even in Christian quarters and scholarship.

When asked, a Muslim will tell you that Christ was not sent to die, but, like the prophets before him and Prophet Muhammad after him, he was sent to live and teach. In short, a Muslim would say there is no Christ killer and, therefore, no need to associate anyone with that indictment and no need to cause anyone to fear it. What happened to Jesus at the end of his life was not about violence, but about honor in the face of vehement rejection. God raised His prophet to Himself, thus sparing Jesus of the execution Gibson so graphically detailed and imprinted in the public mind through the very powerful medium of art and culture. This is a view that was also shared among some early Christian sects, like the Basilideans, who believed that Christ himself was never crucified.

To vilify Jesus and deny that he is one of God's prophets and messengers is a cardinal sin in Islam, enough to disqualify one from the faith. To deify Jesus, however, is considered an affront

to the primordial foundation of the religion project: the oneness of God and His sole divinity. The Muslim "middle" view here is not a self-conscious act of officiating a religious debate between Jews and Christians. Our understanding and beliefs regarding Christ are essentially identical to the beliefs we have about Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Muhammad: all prophets, all humans, sent by God to teach humanity certain things that should keep us guided and clear in our very brief lives. If we are ever to be confused about something, let it not be about God and His divinity, and humankind and our humanity, especially as it pertains to our salvation quest. In Islamic theology, the human being is born pure, brought into this world in a state of grace. The concept of Original Sin is essentially homeless in our tradition. We inherit eye color and receding hairlines from our parents, not their wrongdoing. Forgiveness, pardoning, and mercy are of God's essence, and He generously bestows them for the cool price of belief and sincerity.

In an important way, "The Passion" is an accidental expose about the religious sensitivities of our times, about a wounded spirituality that seems to require sensationalism to keep the faithful going. This is a point that men and women of religion may all agree upon and observe in their respective flocks. Mel Gibson unwittingly may have done a service in raising issues indigenous to the human spirit that the postmodern world seems to shun, issues about God, prophets, salvation, mercy, and hope. It's a vital conversation with divides and alliances, passions and perils, but a conversation that nonetheless can stand to hear the "middle" view that Islam naturally offers. Something of this view, in unavoidably brief fashion, now follows:

Muslims love and revere Jesus, and believe in him as a Prophet and Messenger of God, a great teacher and guide for people. But Muslims do not believe that Jesus was God or the Son of God. Nor do Muslims believe that he was slain on the cross, as some early sects of Christians had once believed. Jesus was sent to the Children of Israel to revive faith and a spiritual connection with God. All the miracles that Jesus performed were indeed true: raising the dead, healing the blind and the leper, and more. These miracles, however, occurred through the auspices of God's power and will, as it was with the splitting of the sea for Moses, Solomon understanding the utterances of animals, and many other suspensions of the natural order. God is the Creator, and when He determines something, He but says to it "Be" and it is! (as the Quran states). Muslims venerate Mary, the mother of Jesus. She indeed gave birth to Jesus though she was a virgin. She was a spiritual woman who was chosen among her people to the office of special contemplation and prayer. But Muslims do not hold her to be the "mother of God" and similar attributes. She too was fully human and was a beloved and important person in a remarkable series of miracles in a special time in human history. Every biology and miracle, the explainable and the inexplicable, whether it is the creation of Adam from clay or the conception of any given child of two parents, goes back to God. It is all the same to Him. All of it easy. All of it His.

In Islamic parlance, Jesus (peace be upon him) is known by the venerable titles of "Word" and "Spirit," since the Quran tells us that God cast the "word" or "spirit" upon Mary, the Mother of Jesus. ***"Indeed, the angels said: 'O Mary! God gives you glad tidings of a word from Him, whose name is the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, illustrious in this world and the Hereafter, and he shall be among those brought near [to God]. He will speak to humankind in the cradle and in manhood, and he is of the righteous'"*** (Quran,3:45).

Also, the Quran states: "*The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was but a Messenger of God, and His word which He conveyed to Mary, and a spirit proceeding from Him*" (Quran, 4:171). "*And indeed God gave Moses the Book [Torah], and after him We sent Messengers in succession. We gave Jesus son of Mary clear proofs and strengthened him with the Holy Spirit [Angel Gabriel]*" (Quran, 2:87).

The thought life of a Muslim with regard to all the prophets is best summed by the following verse of the Quran "*Say [O believers]: 'We believe in God and [the Book] sent down to us, and what was sent down to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes; and what was given to Moses and Jesus and what was given to [all] the Prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and to Him do we surrender ourselves'*" (Quran 2:136).

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*"Invite all to the way of thy Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching;
And consult with them in ways that are best and most gracious."
(Al Qur'an, 16:125)*