

EASTER SUNDAY



The Holy Face, painted by French artist Georges Rouault in 1933

A prophet of Islam

Sayyid Muhammad Rizvi is Imam of the Ja'fari Islamic Centre in Thornhill, Ont. He writes:

AS THE YOUNGEST OF THE THREE monotheistic world religions, Islam has a special place for Jesus, the son of Mary.

In the Islamic worldview, God sent many messengers and prophets to guide mankind, five of those messengers are given the highest rank in the spiritual hierarchy: Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and, of course, Muhammad (peace be upon them).

Jesus and his mother, the Virgin Mary, are mentioned many times in the Qur'an. In fact, there is a chapter in the Qur'an named after her as 'Maryam'. There are many similarities in the beliefs of Christians and Muslims concerning Jesus. The Qur'an talks about Mary's birth and her childhood, and that she was chosen by God for the miraculous birth of Jesus, the 'word of God'. It confirms the miracles that Jesus was able to perform: speaking as a baby in the cradle, healing the sick, curing of lepers and blind people, and even raising the dead back to life by God's power.

Muslims, however, do not believe in Jesus as the son of God. The Qur'an says that even Jesus himself never claimed to be God's son or of Divine nature. Surely the example of Jesus's (birth), in the view of God, is like the example of Adam's: God created his (image) from dust and then said to it, "Be", and he came to existence. (The Qur'an 3:58)

The mission of Jesus was to reform the Israelites. When his enemies conspired to kill him, God raised Jesus unto Himself in the heavens. The Qur'an clearly states that "They did not kill him nor did they crucify him, but it only appeared to them so. They surely did not kill him; rather God raised him unto Himself." (4:157) And so the Muslims do not believe in the crucifixion of Jesus and, consequently in his resurrection after the crucifixion.

In the final stages of the story of Jesus, the Muslims share the Christians' expectation of the return of Jesus.

According to the well-known canonical sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, Jesus will return to the earth before doomsday to assist the Mahdi, the Muslim Messiah, in establishing the Kingdom of God on the earth.

A Jewish view

Reuven P. Bulka is rabbi of Congregation Machzikei Hadas in Ottawa. He writes:

ONE OF THE MOST UNFORTUNATE schisms in the history of the world is the cataclysmic split-off from the Jewish community of the Christian sect a few thousand years ago.

This was a bitter divorce which resulted in thousands of years of tragedy. It is only in the latter part of this century that we are coming to grips with this history and the responsibility for it.

Almost 2,000 years ago Jesus was a Jew who espoused Judaism but had difficulties with the Jewish establishment. With each succeeding generation he became less Jewish and more Christian, less human and more deified.

Simultaneously the gulf between the Jews and the Christians widened, resulting in intense hatred and the ugly consequences of that hate, up to and including the Holocaust.

For Jews then, he was simply one of them. Jesus was a Jewish person with whom they disagreed but the disagreement was within the community matrix. The historical Jesus is not the Jesus that the people knew then.

That the historical Jesus became the rallying symbol for centuries of cruel oppression is a perversion that Jesus never anticipated nor could he have desired that this occur.

That the historical Jesus weaned away hundreds of millions from paganism is a reality that Jews, in spite of their suffering, are grateful for.

We cannot undo history but we can learn from it. Indeed we must learn from it. Jesus's history reveals that any religious idea gone haywire can lead to massive tragedy. At the same time a religious idea can impassion in a positive way.

Passion, as we have learned, can be volatile. The lessons of history are bringing more and more church leaders to do whatever they can to assure that in the future, the passion will be channeled only in a positive way. For that all humanity is grateful.

Baha'i and Jesus

Dr. Christopher Buck is a Baha'i and a lecturer in religion at Carleton University. He writes:

GLEANINGS FROM THE WRITINGS OF Baha'u'llah, who founded the Baha'i faith in Persia in the nineteenth century, and suffered imprisonment and exile for his beliefs:

'Know thou that when the Son of Man yielded up His breath to God, the whole creation wept with a great weeping. By sacrificing Himself, however, a fresh capacity was infused into all created things. Its evidences, as witnessed in all the peoples of the earth, are now manifest before thee.

'The deepest wisdom which the sages have uttered, the profoundest learning which any mind hath unfolded, the arts which the ablest hands have produced, the influence exerted by the most potent of rulers, are but manifestations of the quickening power released by His transcendent Spirit. His all-pervasive, and resplendent Spirit.

'We testify that when He came into the world, He shed the splendor of His glory upon all created things. Through Him the leper recovered from the leprosy of perversity and ignorance. Through Him, the unchaste and wayward were healed. Through His power, born of Almighty God, the eyes of the blind were opened, and the soul of the sinner sanctified.

'Leprosy may be interpreted as any veil that interveneth between man and the recognition of the Lord, his God. Whoso alloweth himself to be shut out from Him is indeed a leper, who shall not be remembered in the Kingdom of God, the Mighty, the All-Praised. We bear witness that through the power of the Word of God every leper was cleansed, every sickness was healed, every human infirmity was banished. He it is Who purified the world.



Blessed is the man who, with a face beaming with light, hath turned towards Him.'

This statement is remarkable in that Baha'u'llah attributes the rise of western civilization to the spiritual power unleashed by Christ's passion on the Cross. The masterpieces of art, the great works of philosophy, the discoveries of science, even the rise of the Great Powers in nineteenth-century Europe are traced to Christ's influence. This is part of Baha'u'llah's theory of civilization and the role that Jesus Christ has played in it.

On comparative grounds, this seems to me to be a rather unique Christology. Baha'u'llah has a very high Christology. In its basic features, it differs little from a Christian perspective except that Baha'i see Christ as God in nature, but not in essence. (Baha'u'llah has advanced a doctrine of manifestation in place of the Christian doctrine of incarnation.) There is also the fact that Baha'u'llah's Christology is not exclusive, as it recognizes the authenticity and greatness of Muhammad, Zoroaster, Krishna, the Buddha as well. Even so, Baha'u'llah clearly attaches enormous significance to the Christ event.

The Cross is seen as a cosmic event, and the person and work of Christ is viewed as a watershed in human history. Baha'u'llah's connection of the Christ event to the history of Western civilization goes far beyond any notion of personal salvation in the traditional sense, such that, in my own understanding, Baha'u'llah extends what systematic theologians call the order of salvation to civilization itself. Baha'is are quite concerned with what theologians call mutual salvation, which Baha'i see as a complement to personal salvation.

Speaking personally, and not as an academic, as a former Christian I found that I was able to carry my belief and love of Christ into my faith as a Baha'i. Baha'i regard Baha'u'llah as the one foretold by Christ, so there is really no reason for a Baha'i to wish to diminish the greatness of Christ. To do so would be to diminish the greatness of Baha'u'llah and to violate Baha'u'llah's doctrine of the fraternity of the great religious figures of history and the accumulative nature of their teachings, which Baha'i refer to as 'progressive revelation'.

A humanist speaks

Earl Doherty is a member of both the Humanist Association of Canada and the Humanist Association of Ottawa. He writes:

IF THE QUESTION 'WHO DO MEN SAY that I am?' had been posed to Paul, he would have given a very different answer than later generations of Christians have done. First, Paul would have said that the questioning word had come from heaven, for Christians of his time knew only of a

Christ who was a divine entity, a Son of God who existed entirely in the spiritual world. He communicated with mystics like Paul through visions and scripture.

The first-century epistles give us such a picture, for they focus on the Spirit as the source of all knowledge about Christ, they talk of God's secrets revealed for the first time by preachers like Paul, and they fail to equate the divine Son they speak of with any human man who had recently lived, taught, performed miracles and died on Calvary.

Paul's 'Christ Jesus' was not a historical person, but a Jewish sectarian version of the central religious concept of the Greco-Roman age; that the ultimate God related to the world through a spiritual intermediary, an emanation of himself. The Greeks had the 'Logos,' the 'Jewish perfected Wisdom'.

This Christian 'Son' had also performed a redeeming sacrifice, not on earth or in history, but in the spiritual realm. Greeks and Jews saw their universe as a layered one, all of it interacting. Divine beings worked in the higher world of spirit, and they possessed some features which were counterparts to those of humans. They could undergo suffering and death at the hands of evil forces, as Paul tells us in I Corinthians 2:8, which many scholars admit is a reference to such demon spirits, not human rulers.

Paul's Christ, though very much a Jewish product, resembled the saviour gods of the pagan mystery cults, who had performed saving acts in a mythical setting, not on earth. The activities of Christ in the mythical world could be gleaned from passages in scripture.

The Gospel story, the product of one man or circle (since all lives of Jesus are essentially derived from Mark) began as a metaphorical rendition of the spiritual Christ, following a Jewish practice known as 'midrash.' We can see this especially in the Passion story, which Mark puts together out of pieces of the Psalms and Prophets. To the Gospel myth was added the experiences of a preaching community in Galilee which produced the document known as 'G'.

In the second century, this fictional Jesus of Nazareth began to be seen as an actual historical man.

The Jesus-as-myth theory has been developing two centuries, though out of the mainstream circles of New Testament scholarship. My own studies on ancient religion have led me to refine the theory, and I find it a persuasive interpretation of the origins of the western world's faith. One might say that it was good enough for Paul ... Yet once the Gospel Jesus became real, there was no going back.

For a fuller account of the myth theory, see 'The Jesus Puzzle' site on the Web: <http://www.mag.com/oblio/jesus.html>

A Buddhist view

Some thoughts gleaned from Dr. Suwanda Suganarsi, the former president of the Buddhist Council of Canada, and a professor of Interfaith Studies at Trinity College, University of Toronto:

DR. SUGANARSI BELIEVES JESUS was a carpenter who, as a result of some experiences, became a religious teacher. He was taught by example.

'Jesus was probably a peaceful person who did not encourage his disciples to engage in fighting or confrontations. He did not lead any wars — but how many wars have been fought over him ... ?

'I see him as a social rebel: he was not happy with the things he saw around him and tried to change them ...

'From the Buddhist point of view there is no God so he could not have been the son of God. ... "Son of God" could be a title that was common around the time. There may have been a number of sons of God. Similar to how we use the terms "Good boy" or "atta boy" now, at that time it could have been the term of choice for Jewish people. It was overtentative disciples who pushed the idea that he was the Son of God ...

'I don't believe in the resurrection myself. I am skeptical of miracles by anybody ... I believe that you can heal yourself just by being in the presence of somebody you trust ...

A few of Dr. Suganarsi's problems with Christ:

'That Jesus taught, 'Follow me and you will be saved.' But the disciples taught the idea as 'If you don't follow me you won't be saved.'

'That Jesus ejected people from the temple, which gave the message to his disciples that it was okay to use force.

'That Jesus sided with the poor but also expelled the rich. This helped to set up the notion of the poor against the rich, which is not very conducive to developing a humane society.

In the contemporary world if banks announce a profit, people are enraged, yet banks do it in our society too. However, we are conditioned to thinking the worst of them. It's the idea of good guys against the bad guys.

But, Dr. Suganarsi says, Christians are doing a wonderful job in the contemporary world of reaching out to others.