

In a changing world, a world of division, a world that hungers for God, the cenobitical family stands apart. It is stable, because anchored in the service of God. It is united in obedience to the Abbot, and because of the charity of its members in the bond of perfection. From its beginnings monasticism has always been inspired by what is most fundamental and yet what is most creative in the life of Christ as portrayed in the Gospels. St Benedict gathered together a small group of men to serve and praise God through their work and through their prayer. Together they were to seek the kingdom of God and his justice. It has been rightly pointed out that what was added unto them was the whole civilization of Europe. And the end is not yet.



CHRIST IN THE KORAN

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OF the three monotheistic religions of the Semites, Islam was the last to make its appearance upon the stage of history in the third decade of the seventh century. Unlike its two predecessors, Judaism and Christianity, its appearance was attended by a series of epoch-making events which mark the eclipse of the two great empires of the time, Byzantium and Persia. And, whereas the beginnings and development of the two latter religions are surrounded by comparative obscurity, historians know almost all the significant stages in the rise and development of Islam, which forces itself, like a cataclysm, upon the attention of the civilized world by dint of military prowess. One significant feature of the new faith, as it emerges out of the dark background of Western Arabia, is that, from the start, it places itself consciously and deliberately in line with the original Abrahamanic revelation, from which our faith takes its source. Muhammad, not unlike our Lord, declares that he did not come to destroy but to fulfil, and that, like

the prophets of old who preceded him, he was the bearer of good news (Koran 2, 119 and 4, 162) whom God had sent to his fellow-countrymen to preach the unity of God and the inevitability of the Last Day. He did not omit, it is true, to lay claim to a certain pre-eminence which pertained to him by reason of his position as the last of the prophets (or their 'seal') to whom the ultimate and complete revelation of the divine word had come of late (61, 9; 5, 3). What is more, like the prophets who had preceded him, his own coming was foretold, he alleged, by his predecessors—and in particular by the specially favoured 'Jesus, Son of Mary' (61, 6), whom God had sent to Israel in order to confirm and complete the revelation which had been imparted to Moses and the Prophets.¹

But it is not with the validity of this claim that we are concerned here, but rather with the reverse problem: namely, the view of Christ which emerges from the reading of the Koran. This, it should be observed, is a problem which is not without relevance to Christian theology itself. For, if it appears upon examination that the Messianic concept plays a role of some importance in the new, as it did in the old, faith of the Semites, then we have a further confirmation of the centrality of this concept, regardless of whether it is avowed to coincide with the person of Jesus of Nazareth or not. Not, to be sure, that a confirmation of Christ six centuries after his earthly career by an outlandish Semitic 'prophet' would make any difference to the validity of his claim to be the Messiah, but rather that this added testimony from such an unexpected quarter cannot fail to puzzle and impress.

Now the view of Christ which emerges from a study of the Koran, it should be noted at the outset, although impressive, is by no means a consistent one. In the first place, 'Jesus, Son of Mary' is stated to be a mere human whom God had created, like Adam, from earth (3, 59) and had sent, like the rest of the prophets, with a divine commission to the Jews (5, 17), to whom he was to be an example and an

¹ Later Muslim theologians find a basis for this alleged prophecy in the Johannine reference to the coming of the Paraclete (John 14, 16; 16, 7-8).

arbiter in their conflicts (43, 59). But despite this distinction, it is not suggested here that he was endowed with any special status, but is rather said to be a 'mere servant of God' who came to enjoin Israel to obey God, 'his Lord and their Lord'. Here, as it were, the humanity of Christ, with all the humility which attended it, is brought out, but not in order that it might lead thereby naturally and logically to the acknowledgment of his divinity. Rather is this divinity itself questioned and ultimately denied in striking and paradoxical terms. This mere servant of God, Jesus, Son of Mary, is stated to have been miraculously born from the Virgin (3, 47 and 19, 20-21) and is, in addition, said to have spoken as a mere babe to plead with the critics who accused her of in chastity (19, 28ff). But the substance of this first utterance of Christ the babe ('Verily, I am the servant of God'), instead of confirming his special status as the son of God, amounts precisely to a refutation of his divinity. Jesus the babe is made, as it were, to engage in a polemic against himself purporting to refute his divinity, even before he is invested with this extraordinary quality by his eventual followers.

This paradox, however, seems to have eluded the author of the Koran. And so did the paradox lurking in the parallel assertion that Christ was indeed the Word of God and his spirit, which he imparted to Mary, the Chosen One (4, 171 and 3, 45) whom 'he had purified and preferred to all the women of the earth' (3, 42). An attempt to explain this assertion away is ineptly made, to be sure, by describing Mary's conception as the outcome of 'God casting forth' his word or Spirit into her; but this is far from resolving the difficulty inherent in the original assertion. For, whereas the creation of other humans, notably Adam, is spoken of in terms of a divine 'fiat' or command, the Virgin Birth is described as an 'infusion' or a 'casting forth' of the Spirit of God into the Mother of Christ. And when it is recalled what a decisive chasm between God and man the Koran creates, this special and extraordinary demonstration of divine favour towards a mere human mother acquires added significance as evidence for the validity of Christ's status as a supernatural being.

In addition to his miraculous birth and his supernatural status as the Word or Spirit of God, the Koran endows Christ with the power for miracle-making to a degree which far exceeds anything ascribed to such 'prophets' as Moses, Jonas, Solomon or even Muhammad himself.² The main miracles of the canonical Gospels are mentioned, but what is more, a number of miracles which the Gospels do not record are ascribed to Christ. For instance, he is stated to have made sparrows out of clay and caused them to fly by infusing life into them (5, 110 and 3, 43);³ to have brought down from heaven a laden table for his disciples to eat from (5, 113-115);⁴ to have divined what a group of Jews had stored away in their houses (5, 49), and finally to have been miraculously assumed into heaven (3, 55). To this category of apocryphal miracles must also be assigned the miracle of Christ the babe pleading with his mother's taunters, already mentioned, and which the Gospel of the Infancy reports in the opposite sense. (C. 1.) But let it not be imagined that these miracles are advanced here as evidence of Christ's divinity as are the miracles in the Gospels. For it is precisely this thesis which the Koran is concerned to repudiate, with a view to reserving divinity to the Almighty as his exclusive prerogative. Accordingly, in reporting these miracles it makes the interesting, but inadmissible, proviso that Christ performed these miracles by 'God's leave'. In another place, this power for miracle-making is represented as a token of divine favour which God graciously conferred on Christ, as he was wont to do in dispensing his favours and graces freely, but which did not imply any special privilege or pre-eminence pertaining, *sui generis*, as it were, to Christ.

Thus the nature of the Koranic testimony for Christ, despite the extravagant terms of praise in which it is

² It is noteworthy here that Muhammad, who is declared throughout the Koran as a mere human, is not credited there with any miracles whatsoever besides the transmission of the Koran which is considered to be the miracle par excellence (17, 88).

³ A record of this miracle is found in the apocryphal 'Gospel of the Infancy' (C. 36).

⁴ A reference, probably, to the Eucharist.

couched, remains ambiguous and confused. The humanity of Christ alone is admitted, but not his divinity. Even the miraculous and supernatural qualities with which he is loaded are shorn of their ultimate significance as probative evidence of his divinity. The assumption underlying this recognition of his power to perform miracles is that it is derived from God. Needless to say, such an assumption runs counter to the whole spirit of the canonical Gospels in which Christ's miraculous deeds are performed through his own power in his capacity as God—a power which, in his divine wisdom, he never wields in his own favour, as Satan would have him do at the beginning of his earthly career. But, despite this whittling away of the supernatural significance of Christ's miracles, the Koranic record is not without its value. The striking feature of this record is that it is not in what it affirms, but rather in what it denies, that it contradicts the spirit of historical Christianity. In this limited sense, Islam can be described with St John of Damascus as a mere Christian heresy, which errs not by affirmation but by denial, not by assertion but by exclusion. And so can the more modern forms of 'Symbolic' Christianity, which like unitarianism seek to explain away as mere metaphor or symbol the fundamental and distinctive affirmations of Christianity which set it apart from all other forms of religion as a truly supernatural faith.

Among the things which the Koran further denies is the consistency of the doctrine of the Trinity with belief in genuine monotheism. In its obsession with the notion of the absolute and unqualified unity of God, Islam in general, and the Koran in particular, brand as polytheism any theological view which does not accord with their conception of God's unconditional uniqueness, the first article of the Muslim Credo as well as the sole condition of salvation.⁵ The Trinity is interpreted, perhaps owing to the influence of Nestorianism, as a plurality of Gods rather than a trinity of persons in one God, in short, as tritheism. The Virgin Mary figures in the Koran as the Third Person of the Trinity (5, 116)—a view which Muhammad might have picked up from some unlettered and misinformed Christian

⁵ At least with certain sections of theological opinion.

of Arabia.⁶ This is surprising in view of the concession which the Koran makes, presumably at an early stage, in favour of Christians and Jews (the Scripturaries) who are placed on a footing of equality with the Muslims and are accordingly promised salvation in the life to come (3, 84 and 2, 62). What we are entitled to assume is that, in the course of time, the new faith encouraged by success became increasingly more intransigent in its attitude to Christianity which it finally decided to put outside the pale of genuine monotheism altogether.

Finally, the Koran denies the reality of Christ's crucifixion, which, following an early heretical Christian view,⁷ it describes as a mere deceptive panorama to which the witnesses of the crucifixion were subject (4, 157). Like the original exponents of this heresy, the Koran does this perhaps out of deference for Christ whom, it argues, 'was assumed to God'. But the Church has consistently refused to accept this gesture of false deference, because it struck at the very root of the Christian belief in the reality of our Lord's passion: the major episode in the drama of the Redemption. For if we deny the reality of Christ's suffering on the cross, his humiliation and death, we are equally driven to deny his triumph upon death. Thus the very foundations of our belief would be shaken and the historical genesis of the Church itself would be left unexplained. Was it not Christ's rising from the dead which gathered together the faint-hearted flock which his ordeal on the cross had dispersed?

The Koran, logically enough, could not concede the reality of Christ's crucifixion without conceding the fact of his resurrection and consequently his divine title. But it did the next best thing, relieved him of this ordeal and recognized his ascension to heaven, all through the power of God, however, not his own. In this manner it contrived to avoid the paradox inherent in admitting the crucifixion and the

⁶ However, a sect, the Collyridians, long extinct before Muhammad's time, are said by St Epiphanius to have adhered to this heresy which was 'diffused in Arabia, Thrace, and Upper Scythia'. (*Haeres* 3, 75 and 79.)

⁷ Basilides and others, reported by St Epiphanius, op. cit. 24, 3, and Irenaeus, *Contra Haeres*, I, 24.

ascension of Christ, while denying at the same time his divinity. But, be this as it may, the picture which the Koran paints of Christ is a beautiful picture indeed. This extraordinary Jesus, Son of Mary, speaks as a babe, heals the blind and the leprous, raises the dead and is ultimately assumed into heaven. Throughout he is fortified with the Holy Ghost and is miraculously shielded against the nefarious attacks of the Jews. Is not such a character truly divine? What more could God do if he had actually trodden the earthly scene? And what other privileges would he have enjoyed? Notwithstanding this exalted view of Christ, however, the Koran stops short of avowing his divinity. In subsequent generations, fascinated by this noble image of power, beauty and holiness, Muslim consciousness seized upon Christ as the supreme model of holiness—which remains, it is true, mere human holiness. Certain extreme sects even assigned to him the role of demiurge, the Creator of the terrestrial world, and the co-adjutant of God, as it were. But that is a later, and in fact, heterodox development, which has no basis in the Koran and which orthodox theology was accordingly quick to rule out as a blasphemous contention from a Muslim point of view.

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