

## The Bible and the *Qur'an*

In preparing this brief foreword to Ignatius Press's very welcome reprint of Jacques Jomier's impressive *The Bible and the Qur'an*, the title of another book, written a half-century ago, springs to mind: *Ideas Have Consequences* by Richard M. Weaver of the University of Chicago. The title is a lesson in itself.

Two searing examples from the last century and a half amply demonstrate the truth of this assertion: *The Communist Manifesto* and *Mein Kampf*. Millions died; and more millions were ruined because of the odious opinions set forth in these two documents. Streams of refugees, hopeless and broken, irrigated the no man's land of the twentieth century.

Ideas indeed have consequences. If, for example, a society is persuaded that cows are sacred, those beasts will wander about unhindered and be treated with an almost liturgical deference, even if large sections of the populace are often on the brink of starvation. This holds famously true in parts of India, whereas we in Europe and the Americas have a different perspective on cows, seeing them as producers of dairy products and meat.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam each have their respective sacred books. And each has had and will continue to have far-reaching consequences. Frequently, they will be consequences in deadly conflict.

The Hebrew Scriptures are, of course, the Christian Old Testament. To these Hebrew Scriptures, Christianity added the New Testament. And Islam claims that its sacred book, the *Qur'an*, is the word of God. All three of these religions and their scriptures have important things in common, especially the doctrine that there is only one God. Yet this commonality is limited by insurmountable disagreements about God's nature, man, and salvation.

Some questions immediately present themselves: To whom has God revealed his truth? Is God one person or three? Does God have a son? Could God become man: the Incarnation? Or is the very idea blasphemous? Is he a Father of sons and daughters as in the Judeo-Christian tradition, or a Master of slaves as Islam maintains? These are not small matters, and the disagreements issuing from the differences are potentially explosive: cultures and nations historically have been at each other's throats.

The Old Testament is the book of God's revelation to the people of Israel. It is a record of God's law; his covenants; his signs and wonders; and the religious life and history of his covenant people. It also contains the promise of a coming Messiah—the Anointed One—the one who will extend the covenant and salvation to all the nations. The Jews awaited this Messiah.

Finally, he came. He fulfilled the prophecies of the Jewish Scriptures, but his own people rejected him because they could not accept the idea that God could become flesh. No one had seen God since he is a spirit. How could God become a man? Such a claim was ludicrous to the Jews. And even if God had taken on flesh, it was inconceivable that he would suffer such an ignominious death as crucifixion. But this is precisely what Jesus Christ did.

Most refused to believe; but many did, giving rise to historical Christianity. The bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead at a certain time and at a certain place guaranteed the truth of the Christian claim. God had taken on human nature so that men could become partakers of the divine nature. Catholic philosopher Frederick D. Wilhelmsen sums it up most eloquently in the

opening sentences of his philosophical masterpiece *The Metaphysics of Love*:

When God descended from heaven, man arose from the grave of antiquity and shook off the winding sheet of despair. He walked erect and spoke the name which is His being: Son of God in Christ His Brother

As in Judaism, in Islam the very idea of a God-Man is impossible. It is blasphemous. Indeed, Islam understands itself to be a return to basics, as it were: a linking back to the pristine monotheism of Abraham, shorn of all the impurities and accretions of Judaism and Christianity. It teaches that “the greatest of prophets” came from seventh-century Arabia. Muhammad is his name. He is The Prophet. Though God spoke through men such as Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and Jesus, Muhammad is “the seal of the prophets”, for through him came the perfect revelation, the *Qur’an*.

Muhammad supposedly accepted the revelation of God to the Israelites and in the gospel of Jesus; but, the *Qur’an* contradicts the Bible in very important ways. And this raises very important questions. For instance, does the Bible give any grounds for thinking God intended to give a further revelation after the revelation of Jesus? Does it tell us that it will be superseded by a new revelation? Does it foretell another prophet, who would complete the New Testament?

Christians will of necessity argue that the answer to all of these questions is “No”. Islam’s claim to the fullness of divine revelation cannot be correct, for God has already sent his Son, his final Word (John 1:1). There is no fuller revelation to come. There is no greater prophet than the Word made flesh. The writer of Hebrews puts it best: “In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son” (Heb 1:1). The Catechism adds, “Christ, the Son of God made man, is the Father’s one, perfect, and unsurpassable Word. In him he has said everything; there will be no other word than this one” (CCC, 65).

What more could God say? He revealed the mystery by giving us his very self. Jude tells us that we are to “contend for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). Catholics believe that the revelation given “once for all” can be more deeply understood and that doctrine can develop as this understanding increases, but they (along with Protestants and Orthodox Christians) reject claims of other prophets having a fuller message from God than that of Jesus.

How do Muslims account for the differences between the *Qur’an* and the biblical books of previous divine revelation that they supposedly also accept? If there is discontinuity between the Bible and the *Qur’an*, they argue, then it must be that the Jews and Christians have manipulated and altered the truth that God revealed to them.

Perhaps the most glaring theological difference between the *Qur’an* and the Christian Scriptures is in how the respective books treat the doctrine of the Incarnation. The New Testament, based on the historical fact of the Virgin Birth of the Eternal Son of God, who died for our sins and rose again, proclaims salvation for men and their inclusion into the family of God through the work of the Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ: “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God... and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (Jn 1:1, 14). The *Qur’an* on the other hand rejects the idea of God becoming man. Muslims affirm the Virgin Birth of Jesus but vehemently deny his divinity. God can have no son, in the Muslim scheme of things, because that would imply that God had a “consort”, which is clearly impossible. The Christian view that God’s omnipotence means, among other things, that he can

have a son without a “consort” is not addressed.

The word “Islam” means “submission” and Muslims submit to the teaching of the *Qur’an* as the word of God. Muhammad and the *Qur’an* are simply not to be questioned. Since Islam considers the religion of the Jews and Christians to be greatly inferior, Muslims usually don’t compare their beliefs with the Bible.

Does the *Qur’an* teach truth? For the Christian, the answer is “Yes, but...” The *Qur’an* contains truth alongside error. Christianity and Islam, though having important doctrines in common, hold different views of God’s relation to man. In some important respects, these views are mutually exclusive. Thus, both religions cannot be right. On certain important points—such as the identity and significance of Jesus Christ—Christianity and Islam fundamentally disagree.

Jerusalem showcases, as no other city does, the clash of these religions. A walk through the streets of Old Jerusalem reveals how deeply these related yet different religions can affect everyday life. Profound contrasts are found at every turn: the chanted prayers and blast of the ram’s horn as Jews celebrate and weep at the Western Wall; the sound of bells ringing from Christian churches; and the wailing call to prayer sung by the *muezzin* from the Muslim minarets five times a day. Even differences about such things as how their respective adherents dress, what they eat, the kind of schools they create, their family lives, and architecture are shaped by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

This war of ideas is made unmistakably manifest in the streets of the Holy City by the rumble of tanks and the sound of distant gunfire. The heart of Jerusalem is divided. It beats with the revealed truth of one God; yet is torn by this conflict of theologies.

As Christians we are to preach the gospel in season and out. To be better prepared to face the challenges presented by Islam, we must be at least acquainted with its tenets. Islam cannot be ignored. In numbers, it rivals Christianity, having over a billion adherents. It is a powerful force in the world and all indications are that it will continue to gain ground. Christians must engage this religion, which can be both an ally and an intransigent enemy.

Jacques Jomier’s analysis and insight will prove extremely helpful.

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