

‘The Qur’an does not accept that [Jesus] was crucified, but states that he was taken directly to heaven. This is the one irreducible “fact” separating Christianity from Islam’
(Seyyed Hossein Nasr).

Discuss.

(Maximum 1500 words)

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Introduction

Nasr's comment is given (among other occasions) in his book in comparison of other doctrines of Jesus. Nasr states that other doctrines that appear to be incompatible—the nature of Christ and even the idea of the trinity—can be interpreted from a metaphysical outlook that can serve to bring Islamic and Christian views into harmony.¹ Negotiable as these points may seem to Islam, with its dismissal of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus, it right away dismisses Jesus' divine nature and as a consequence the God as revealed throughout Scripture.

Crucifixion

The only verse about the crucifixion in the Qur'an is very clear about the incident: it was *not* the way Jesus died! Christian scholars have tried to explain that Surah 4:157 only denies that it was the Jews who crucified Jesus, which is historically correct. By explaining that the Roman soldiers actually did the work, they hope that Muslims can accept the historicity of the crucifixion, bringing them closer to the atoning work of Christ.² Yet, Cragg states that 'we cannot escape the negation of crucifying by confusion as to the agent.'³ Many understand the sentence, 'it was made to appear to them', as substitutional—someone else, who resembled Jesus, died on the cross. Interestingly, Ali notes that this verse can only mean that it appeared to the people that Jesus died—the words only mean that Jesus did not die because of the crucifixion (he was crucified nevertheless).⁴

Confusion

There seems to be more confusion about Jesus' actual death. That is to say, the Qur'an is not absolutely clear about Jesus' death. There are verses in the Qur'an, like Surah 19:33 (...*the day that I die...*), that state that Jesus died and even that Jesus foretold His death *and* His resurrection. Muslim scholars, who believe that Jesus did *not* die, state that Surah 19:33 narrates about the future. Notwithstanding, in a parallel verse, Surah 19:15, one can read almost the same words, talking about John the Baptist's (Yahya) death (...*the day that he*

1 Nasr, *Islamic*, 209-210.

2 Parrinder, *Jesus*, 119-121.

3 Cragg, *Jesus*, 170.

4 Ali, *English*, 133-135.

dies...). Still, Muslim scholars have no problem with the fact that Yahya died.⁵ Yet, following the obvious implication of the parallel verse, one *should not* place Jesus' death in the future. What is more, one cannot find any reference in the Qur'an about Jesus' death *after* his return.

There are other verses that cause dissent among Muslim scholars. Surah 3:55 says 'O Jesus! I will take thee and raise thee to Myself [...]' (Arabic: '*mutawaffeeka*'). There is no unanimity among Muslim scholars on the meaning of *mutawaffeeka*. Some state that it narrates about a deep sleep, which is not logical as Allah does not need to put Jesus to sleep in order to raise him to himself.⁶ Others explain this word in the sense of 'removing from earth.'⁷ Still, the overall Qur'anic description of Jesus is that of a normal mortal (e.g. Surah 5:75) and he is even made to deny his divinity (Surah 5:116). In line with this it would be logical to conclude that the verse describes Jesus' death.⁸

Nasr's statement may reflect the most common idea about the crucifixion, but Jesus' death itself is certainly not undisputed among Muslim scholars—this disagreement is mostly unknown among average Muslim believers. Many of the Hadith volumes including the two major authentic ones, Sahih Al-Bukhari and Sahih Muslim, are mute on the issue of the crucifixion which makes it precarious for scholars to reach solid conclusions.⁹ The generally accepted view however, is that Jesus did not die the usual human death, but still lives in the body in heaven. Others say that he *did* die (Surah 5:117), but not when he was supposed to be crucified. Thereafter, Jesus has been 'raised up' unto Allah, instead of being disgraced as a criminal, in order to be honoured by Allah as His Messenger: (cf. Surah 4:159).¹⁰

Chain Reaction

As mentioned, a denial of the crucifixion triggers a chain reaction which undermines the fundamental doctrines of Christianity.

5 Ali, *The Glorious*, 201:2469.

6 Kathir, 'A Compilation,' 1510.

7 Yahya, 'The Prophet,' 87.

8 Ali, *History*, 55-57.

9 SearchTruth.

10 Ali, *The Glorious*, 65:664-665; cf. Med, *The Shadow*, 483-484.

Love

By denying Jesus' sacrifice, Islam denies the very essence of God's nature, which is 'love.' The Bible teaches that YHWH *is* love (1 John 4:7-21). It is this love that urged YHWH to send the Son as the Saviour of the world (vs.14). YHWH loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins (vs.9-10). This concept of God is absent in Islam as love requires a relationship. Since Allah exists as one he lacks the inherent relationship needed to love. It is only in the trinity that God can be called love.¹¹ Al-Ghazali notes that it is impossible that Allah should love mankind because 'when there is love there must be a sense of incompleteness in the lover, a realisation that the beloved is needed for complete realisation of self.' Al-Ghazali concludes that this is inconceivable with Allah, since Allah is perfectly complete in himself.¹² The conclusion thus is that Allah and YHWH cannot be seen as the same God.

Trinity

In addition, when God's nature of love is denied, one does no longer need the doctrine of the trinity. As stated, Islam sees God as an absolute unity (*tawhid*) and does not accept distinction within the Godhead. Islamic arguments against Christianity *and* problems for Muslims when they consider Christianity have centred on the doctrine of Trinity.¹³ Accepting the Christian view of God is an unpardonable sin in Islam. While Islam has a high view of Jesus, it denies his divinity or that He was the Son of God.¹⁴

Salvation

Another problem that arises is the corruption of salvation itself. This saving act of Jesus is crucial for Christianity. It is *the* doctrine that sets Christianity apart from all other religions. Jesus was crucified for our sins and raised for our justification (Romans 4.25). In Islam it is believed that at puberty, an account of each person's deeds is opened, and this will be used at the day of judgement to determine one's eternal fate.¹⁵ However, good deeds are still no guarantee that one will be saved as the Qur'an teaches that Allah predestines the fate of every soul (e.g. Surah 2:284)—it is Allah's will when one goes astray, as he will lead

11 Strandness, *The Director's*, 238.

12 Al-Ghazali, cited in: Rhodes, *Reasoning*, 102-103.

13 Cf. Surah 4:171, 5:76.

14 Cf. Surah 9:30, 10:68, 19:35, 43:81-83.

15 Mission Islam, 'Teaching.'

astray whomever he pleases (e.g. Surah 14:4).

Dialogue

Theologically

The Qur'an contains little detail about what happened and, as shown, Muslim scholars are not in agreement about Jesus' death. What they *do* agree on is the concept of Jesus as a very important prophet who plays a crucial role in the end-times.¹⁶ In dialogue one can challenge a Muslim to discover more about Jesus' life and death—a prophet is worthy to be known. Many Muslims are willing to talk about faith—although it is better to avoid hot debates about the crucifixion on the first meetings. The Qur'an can be laid next to the Bible to demonstrate the unique position of Jesus: Word of *and* from God (Surah 3:39,45; 4:171; John 1:1-3,14); Spirit from God (Sura 4:171; 1 Corinthians 15:45); strengthened by the Holy Spirit (sura 2:87,253; 5:113) and He performed miracles (Surah 3:49; 5:113).

Contextualisation

The certainty of salvation is absent in Islam, making it hard for Muslims to rejoice over the future. Dialogue with non-Western Muslims can be fruitful when highlighting the shameful situation of being separated from God. Jesus took upon Himself the shame of humanity—like a father who takes the shame of his son's misbehaviour. Non-Western Muslims will recognise this metaphor as many Islamic cultures are shame based.¹⁷ Furthermore, ChristianAnswers states that the factors that hold Muslims to their religion are usually about 10% theological and 90% cultural. In other words, even though a Muslim accepts Christ's offer, the Muslim will find difficulties leaving Islam because of the risk of losing the safety of the community. Needless to say that this should be a serious consideration while witnessing to Muslims—one should be willing to guide a Muslim into a new community.¹⁸

In Retrospect

16 Smith, *Muslims*, 26-27.

17 Cf. Parshall, *Muslim*, 97, 89.

18 ChristianAnswers, '*Witnessing*.'

Looking at the results of the dismissal of the crucifixion one can indeed conclude that it *is* an irreducible fact that not only separates Christianity and Islam but also demonstrates that the two in their profound foundations cannot be united. What is more, while talking about Allah and YHWH, one needs to recognise that they are not the same.

To have effective conversations with Muslims, it is worthwhile to examine Islam. Christ's death, for example, is not a straightforward issue in Islam. This can, together with a strong community to welcome possible converts, be a fruitful topic in dialogue—realising that (often) contextualisation is needed.

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