

81 Christianity and Islam

As I said in starting my last article [80] ‘I’m definitely on a journey’, and the other day someone on our editors’ discussion forum asked for an alternative expression to ‘spiritual journey’.

I responded by asking what sort of idea she was trying to express, and I continued by saying that I had lately been writing about my own spiritual journey and had used that very term x-number of times and just ‘journey’ (where ‘spiritual’ was implied) y-number of times.

This prompted a small exchange in which I gave the URL of my ‘Thoughts’ web page, following which I had a lovely email conversation with a Christian lady, whose thinking is going along similar lines to my own. I also have an ongoing discussion with a lady who said she wasn’t a Christian but had read a couple of the articles and was pleased that people ‘from the Abrahamic faiths’ were willing to faithfully question (to use my expression, not hers) what we’ve always been taught.

One of her first comments, having said she was a Muslim, was that ‘the Qur’an speaks of divine love and mercy more than it does of punishment’ – and isn’t that *exactly* what I’ve been saying about the Bible?! But I’d say that this is not the impression we have of Islam – those of us who have not actually read the Qur’an – and this parallels with people’s attitudes to the Bible. How many people (even Christians!) are unaware that the Bible speaks more of divine love and mercy than it does of punishment?!

I’m still very much in enquiry mode where Islam is concerned, and this thought is definitely an ‘I wonder’ discussion starter, but I seem to see a pattern in humankind’s relationship with the Divine. Let me explain.

This morning, I stumbled upon Romans 11 (I had taken my Gideon New Testament into ‘the little room’ and noticed that I’d randomly slipped a piece of paper into that page). I thought it didn’t look a terribly fruitful passage and almost turned to something ‘nicer’, but every passage in the Bible is there to speak to us in whatever way God chooses, so I read it.

It seemed to be saying that God couldn’t and wouldn’t give up on the Jews – and isn’t that what I’ve been seeing about the nature of God? What human parent gives up on their child (‘Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!’ Isaiah 49:15), so how much more will God not give up on his people, the Jews.

And getting back to the Qur’an, one of my prayer partners, Colin, told me that he had visited several Christian churches in Northern Cyprus that had been converted into mosques. In one, he got chatting to an imam, who showed him a beautifully illustrated children’s book about the Qur’an. The imam very kindly gave him a copy – it was written in English – so I borrowed it, to least start to fill the massive hole in my knowledge of the Muslim holy book.

It was fascinating, certainly, but when I mentioned it to my Muslim friend, she talked about ‘such books’ saying that ‘We grew up embarrassed by their antiquated take on Islam.’ My impression was that, while it repeatedly referred to Allah’s great love for His people, the equally strong strand was about what you had to do to avoid displeasing Allah; certainly, obeying your parents formed something of a litany through the whole book.

Right, so where is all this leading my thinking? It has occurred to me is how easy it is for 'religion' to take over from relationship – as I might have mentioned before! Could it be that the One God keeps trying to bring us back? He certainly did so, right throughout the Old Testament.

Then in Jesus' time, the Pharisees had built up an atmosphere of punishment and exclusion of people who weren't holy enough. Jesus tried to convince people that God's plan had always been to provide forgiveness, to draw people back into relationship.

So, following my friend's comments about love and mercy in the Qur'an, could it be that, right from the start of Islam, God (Allah) was using the prophet Muhammed to try to bring people back into loving relationship? I gather that Muslims have the Injil (= Gospel = Good News), so maybe this was Allah's attempt to point people yet again in the right direction, back into loving relationship, but humans have allowed religion to take over from relationship.

Well, it's just a thought.

And as you know, I feel that the Reformation was another attempt by God to bring us back to focusing on the loving relationship shown in the Bible, so that we should come to God in trust (faith) not by doing things to please God (works). But there again, we've allowed religion to take over, and we've ended up with a prescriptive formula (penal substitution) by which we can determine who is out and who is in, and while we talk about God's love, the litany of this version of the gospel is that God needs to punish someone for sins committed.

And the other parallel I see is that both (modern?) Islam and modern Christianity, concentrate on earth as a temporary stage, preparing us for the real deal of 'heaven'. We say or imply that going to heaven will rescue us out of the mess we've created here. Where in the New Testament does it talk about 'going to heaven'?!

Through my reading of Tom Wright's book and the 'coincidence' [80] of my 'discovering' the tree of life, I'm realising again the importance of 'the kingdom', which was Jesus' constant theme ('Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near'), and which we almost totally ignore as modern Christians.

(The sense of being led on this journey by God is amazing! Haven't I kept saying, in my articles, that 'the kingdom' was a theme which I would need to explore, but when I said that, I had no idea just how important it would prove to be. Exciting!)

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