

The Gospel and the Muslim World

BY KENNETH CRAGG

“HOW funny,” said Alice, when she first began moving towards her wonderland in the heart of the earth—“how funny to come out among the people of the antipathies!” Antipodes, of course, was what she meant. But there is sense even in the slip of her tongue. The mere roundness of the planet, after all, does not make much difference to humanity, even if it reverses the seasons. There are more striking and exacting divergencies among men than just the state of being “down under” to each other.

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“The people of the antipathies” is perhaps a fair description of Muslims from the Christian point of view. The world that is shaped by the Qur’ān disagrees, in essential ways, with crucial elements of Christian conviction — the capacity of God for love in sacrifice, for example, and the feasibility of Divine intervention in the human scene, and the redemptive dimensions of man’s remaking. For all these integral meanings of the Gospel there is a prompt and steady antipathy in the Muslim mind. At the heart of our worship is the sacrament of a Cross which, in Muslim view, was never consummated. We live, as Christians, by the assurance of a Divine advent among men from a heaven, which, as Islam conceives it, admits of no such costly venture. These central discrepancies in the Muslim-Christian account of things are accompanied in other and more superficial realms by traditions of “otherness” and estrangement, historical, political, and cultural, which numerous contemporary factors have tended to exacerbate. Though our concern, in what follows, is with the deeper themes that belong to theology, it is well to be alert about the alienations that belong with politics, and current history.

Antipathies, then, sundering us further than the antipodes! Yet we cannot really broach them, unless we have the whole in focus. There is far, far more in common than ignorance sometimes supposes. It will hardly do to be as naïve about the antipathies as Alice was of the antipodes when she talked of meeting people who walked with their heads downwards! No mission is served by missing our capacity to be alike. For one thing, there are the multiplied problems of the modern world, which more and more we share in common. There is the increasing single denominator of technological development. The peoples of the 20th century share more predicaments in common than those of any previous generation. The big external facts of our time, nuclear power, space exploration, population pressure, tolerate few immunities or seclusions. New nations participate in the same patterns of political evolution as those of the peoples whose control they have repudiated. Problems of state and of society are recurrent in new situations: the independence of the parts matches the interdependence of the totality. The great religions of the world are thus very deeply involved in the growing sameness of the external circumstances which provide the current context of their respective cultures.

Deeper, if less spectacular, is the unifying fact of human nature. "If you prick us do we not bleed?" cried Shylock in his passionate protest against the Gentile denial of his membership with man. It is a truth which we all too often overlook. What is valid in our abstract contrasts is so often unrelated in our thoughts to what is common in our concrete condition. The psychology of temptation, the menace of hypocrisy, the tyranny of opinion, the fear of the unknown, the frailty of the ordinary, the barrenness of formalism — all these are universally reproduced *mutatis mutandis* whether it be in mosque or church or synagogue. Man in his mortality and finitude is the same creature whatever the colour of his skin or the language of his fathers. The elemental human problems of life and death, of sickness and sorrow, of frailty and fear, press equally upon all races in the sense that they establish a kinship of creaturehood whenever their mutuality is felt and explored. "Equally" is, of course, a false word in this context if we fail to remember that for so many in the west the *incidence* of human tribulation is softened by the amenities of science or the conventions of a protective civilization. But where, as in "the kingdom of heaven," the essential fellowship of the human family, within its single experience of moral finitude, and across the artificial barriers of technology, is confessed and accepted, we have a basis of relationship abiding through all antipathy. Christian medical and social ministry in Asia and Africa is simply the active recognition of a common humanity in fulfilment of the law of Christ. In so far as it conforms to that law it proclaims a "sympathy" (in the deepest sense), a fellow-manhood, which is the only sure context of the "antipathies". The Gospel in the Muslim world is not only a doctrinal encounter: it is a spiritual ministry: it is a steady proceeding upon the Gospel's account of men in their relationships. It is a being the good Samaritan before, during, and through, all discussion, however urgent, about the reality of the heavenly "Samaritan" and the personality of the Teacher of, and in, the parable.

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Yet the criteria and the grounds of such relationships, actively expressed in human ministry, inevitably bring us back to doctrine. "We love, because He first loved us." The compassion the Gospel teaches cannot be divorced from the compassion the Gospel tells. In the end what makes us effectively and responsibly "fellows" with all men is the fact that God, in Christ, is effectively and responsibly "fellow" with us all. All Christian initiative to serve springs from, and lives through, the Divine advent to redeem. Responsive love among men only stands in a responsible love from heaven. And what are the Incarnation and the Cross but God's action for man's remaking, responsibly undertaken in vindication of the Divine sovereignty and in expression of the Divine nature? So there can be no conspiracy of silence about the acts of God, about the definitive Gospel of which all else is active illustration. Whatever our personal or institutional context of Muslim-Christian relation (and there are many changing patterns), this witness about God, in Christ, is the ultimate concern, and in the final sense of the word, the ultimate "controversy". And how

appropriate that is to Islam, which in the final analysis is a system standing in, and deriving from, an account of God.

No intelligent Muslim can complain about a relationship which proposes to take his own Islamic convictions, about Divine unity, Divine sovereignty, and Divine compassion, utterly seriously and realistically. It is just this which any adequate evangelical Christian relation to Islam is necessarily doing. The concepts of incarnation and grace, which he greets with such antipathy, are, in the Christian scheme, an indispensable part of just those convictions about unity, authority, and mercy which he most cherishes. How odd it is, then, that what motivates the Muslim thinker in rejecting the Gospel should not have been geared to understanding it! How odder still that the Christian Church should have missed, in its spiritual trusteeship, the immense assets in the Islamic grounds for anti-Christian "prejudice"! There are deep senses in which the very stumbling-blocks have the possibility of becoming stepping-stones. Even antipathies presuppose affinities.

Since we cannot be comprehensive, let us study a theological relation between the Gospel and the faith of Islam in two areas, namely Incarnation and the Divine Unity, and the Cross and the Divine Mercy. Here we are clearly at the heart of what is elemental to each faith. In this way we may hope to illustrate the Christian attitude to Muslim antipathies and the sense in which they may become in fact occasions of interpretation.

The Christian understanding of Christ is anathema to Islamic theology, whose veto on the Sonship of Christ is second nature to almost every Muslim, however illiterate or untutored. "Exalted be God above all that ye associate with Him", he cries, echoing the Qur'anic repudiation of such "pretensions" on the part of Jesus or His disciples on His behalf. "Messiah never scorns to be a servant unto God", and so he never "pretends" to be a Son. (*Surah* iv. 173) The verse is a useful one, bringing together as it does the same Son-Servant theme as Philippians ii, with the immense difference that whereas, in the latter, "the servant" is positively and necessarily the Son (by virtue of a redemptive mission such as only the Son could accomplish), in the former Messiah's readiness humbly to serve God *ipso facto* excludes his desiring or holding any other status. The misunderstanding could not be clearer. It is plain that by "Son" the Qur'an supposes some usurpation, some assertion, some failure in obedience, the erection of a rival authority to God's. There is plainly no awareness of "Sonship" as being within the fulness of Divine relation to human need and so within the fulness of the Divine being.

By virtue of this unawareness of God in Christ, of "the Son proceeding from the Father" as the Divine action moving by the Divine intention, Islam finds a Christian Christology incompatible with its basic assertion of the Divine Unity. It becomes, in Muslim view, a piece of that very *Shirk*, or alienation of the Divine to the non-Divine, which, in polytheistic form, Islam was generated to denounce and extirpate. Yet, properly understood, that Christian Christology of "the Word made flesh", of "the only Son", is the perfect expression and safeguard of that Unity. God, in the Christian scheme, comes

redemptively from Heaven, only because He remains meaningfully within it.

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Our first great task, then, is the proclamation of the Incarnation as happening within the undivided Unity of God. And really grappling with this issue brings us great enrichment of Christian wonder and awe, out of which the witness of acts of comparative theology becomes both a benediction and a joy. We may, perhaps, move into it by considering how the word "God" (or *Allah* in Arabic) does not denote a genus or a class, of which there are other participants. The word "God" is absolute and singular, and cannot possibly be a generic word. (True: we refer to "gods many" but then we have pseudo-deities in mind, or false conceptions of God. Islam cannot be supposed to be affirming "gods" when, in the *Shahadah*, or confession, it mentions them to deny them being: "There is no god except God".) God Himself is one, and cannot be otherwise. So the word which denotes Him cannot sustain a plural. Islam would certainly agree with all this Christian theology: it says the same emphatically. Its own word *Allah* is grammatically and ontologically only and always singular.

Now when Christians speak of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as God, they do not mean that these are generically "God"—i.e., that they are each representative of a genus. We mean that they are identically "God". There is of course no other illustration of this situation, precisely because God is One.¹ But, unhappily, so much, perhaps all, Muslim polemic against Christian theology at this point, has taken the terms, God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, as if they were each generically God, which the very notion of God, as we have seen, explicitly excludes. They are God identically. Why then the discernibility of distinction within an identical predicate? Is not distinction, in any sense, implying that "God" has in fact become a generic predicate? The question, did Muslims in fact so formulate it, would take us right to the heart of the intelligible suspicions about the Trinity they feel. The answer is that the discernibility (as distinct from the fact) has to do with our experience of Who God, in His singular identity, is. Knowledge of God, the more so since He is absolutely One, must necessarily be experimental. It must be a knowledge of reality, not merely of a proposition: or better, its propositional formulation can only arise from awareness and experience. God will be known for what He is in His unique identity, through what He is and does in His manward relation. Here we find a threefold awareness which we understand as giving us the meaning, within our humanness, of God's singular identity.

God's self-declaration and His accessibility to human knowing are twin aspects of the same truth. They meet, in "the Word made flesh" and their meeting is surely the heart significance of that vital phrase. Thus seen, the Incarnation, far from creating (by human assertion, that is) a new, and rival, claimant to some generic predicate, "God", brings the singular Divine identity into adequate human

¹ The argument here owes much to R. C. Moberly, *Atonement and Personality*, pp. 84-85.

knowability. If only for that reason, it ultimately guards against, in the surest way, the multiplication of notions of God and a consequent pluralism of "gods." In the end, faith in "the Word made flesh" is the only adequate counter to *Shirk*, or "association" with God, by false concepts, of what is not properly Divine. When we really penetrate the matter, the very thing, namely Unity, in the interests of which Islam denies the Incarnation, is seen to be the one thing with which it has most to do. That God may be known as One (in the one identity which, as we have seen, is the Muslim and Christian, meaning of the word) He must be known as He is. If pluralism is in essence multiplication of pseudo-beliefs giving an existence of credence to non-entities, then the final security of Unity (in the practical sense which matters here) as a known, acknowledged, worshipped, and served Unity (all of which Islam demands and exists to do), lies in the self-revelation of the Divine nature.

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But the deep, positive theological relation of Christian faith in God incarnate in Christ, to the Islamic concern for Unity, does not lie only in this sphere of revelation and knowledge. There is a close relation between Unity and Sovereignty — a relation of which Islam has been characteristically aware. It is implicit in the phrase: *Allahua kbar*, "God is great" — great beyond comparison, greater because there is only He, a comparative form being used without there being any possibility of comparison. The meaning is that God is incomparably great. "There is no power, no authority, save in Him." He is without like, or equal, not only in the sense of nature but of reign. He is God over all, blessed for ever. Men might commit *Shirk* not only in the sense of believing a rival deity to be, but in conceiving a rival power to exist. His sovereignty is as unchallenged as His being is unique. Hence the truceless Islamic war with idolatry.

But a little reflection makes it clear that the most grievous form of idolatry is sin. The most flagrant "alternative" to God is the insubordination that "has other gods" but Him, in that it flouts what is due to Him and alienates it to another. This happens most reprehensibly when men defy the laws God gives in revelation. No sovereignty can condone or ignore the wilful violation of its legislation without forfeiting its own authority. Law-breaking unmet is law-giving undone. Sin on man's part is, then, an essential challenge to the Godness of God. The very unity of God is thus at stake in the human defiance of His rule. When men assert the false absolutes that flout God's reign, they are asserting in sin that for them there are other gods. His Unity means, of necessity, a redemptive response to this defiance. And what is the meaning of the faith of the Holy Trinity but the formulation of a God Who is in truly redemptive relation to the wrongness of the world?

It is thus that an enterprise of grace is inseparable from a sovereignty of power. Revelation of law does not exhaust the Divine responsibility in the human situation. Revelation, like creation, means that God is not God in indifference about man. In intimating His purpose for man to man (as Islam believes in its reception of the Qur'an and

the *Shari'ah* as touchstones of Divine ideology), He involves His sovereignty in the circumstances of the human response. Something Divine is, in other words, crucially at stake in the human. The Muslim confesses that situation in the summons he acknowledges to *Islam*, or submissive conformity. What, then, of the actual human *non-Islam*, the crucial human defiance of rightness, our sinful preference of ourselves, our submission to false absolutes?

For the Christian faith, the sovereignty that is staked in revelation of law, vindicates itself in achievement of redemption. God's revelatory involvement with man (not to speak of His involvement as Creator) completes itself in a redemptive involvement (which also finalizes the revelation). Is it not precisely this which God in Christ is about? The Gospel fulfils the law because the Incarnation makes good the revelatory stake God has in our being in decision. By His coming thus to retrieve, within the terms of human freedom, the broken purpose both of the creative intention and the revelatory design, God takes adequately Divine care of what His sovereignty means in the human situation—care such as law alone, or unredeeming judgment alone, would not feasibly achieve. It is thus by grace that God reigns and, for Christian faith, the only final and ultimate submission—the only submission that has validly responded to all that God is—happens in that context when men awaken to the Cross. "That God may be all in all" (a profoundly Islamic necessity) is the end and intent, according to the New Testament, of the whole enterprise of God in Christ (I Cor. xv. 28).

There is much more to this theme: but here is its heart. How tragic is the long barrenness of Muslim-Christian intellectual relationships, when there has been in trust all this potential of spiritual translation and transaction! We have only, in this sense, to invite the Muslim to be more seriously Islamic to find himself face to face with the deepest reaches of the Gospel's meaning. "Only" of course is a big word. But is it not true that the faith of the Incarnation has to do with a most tremendous anti-idolatry, because it had to do with man's liberation by Divine travail from un-God-liness in every form into the glory of the confession: "Whom have I in heaven but Thee?"? This sense of things is only intensified when we turn to the Cross.

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Most readers will be familiar with the general Muslim antipathy in this realm. The Cross did not happen to Jesus. There was at the arrest or trial of Jesus, what can only be described as a "becoming apparent" of the proceedings. The most familiar view is that there was a definite substitution by which some other person (possibly Judas Iscariot) came to have the external identity of Jesus and suffered in His place. Or, according to the Ahmadiyyah movements in Islam, Jesus actually and physically suffered crucifixion but only "seemed to die" under it and was later resuscitated in the tomb without having succumbed. Or, in the thought of a few contemporary Muslims, we are to understand that there was a supervening of the eternal dimension over a temporal scene (perhaps like what happened at the Ascension). In any event (except the Ahmadiyyah view which has Jesus

die, naturally, in Kashmir decades later), Jesus was raptured to heaven and did not suffer. What transpired at Calvary was either by substitution, or illusion, or fantasy.

We cannot stay here over the historical aspects of this account of the Cross, though it is important to realize that it leaves intact the whole antecedents of the climax as the Gospels describe them, namely the animosity that willed Christ's execution and His own attitudes, accepting, and not violently countering or otherwise shirking, such a pattern of events.¹ It is most important to hold on to these manward aspects of Calvary as epitomizing, in the will to crucify, the sin of the world, and the Messianic decisions of Jesus in electing to bear that sin. For these are implicit in the Muslim and Qur'anic account and may take us far in our interpretative obligations. There is no point in a "becoming apparent" of a finale which has no antecedents, nor in a "rescue" from a situation which does not exist. Had Jesus' contemporaries been docile or indifferent, or had He been the sort of Messiah to lead, rather than suffer under, violent action, then plainly even an "apparent" Cross could never have been an eventuality.

But important, and potential, as matters of historicity are, the ultimate issue here is theological. In the Muslim view, it is not simply that the Cross *did* not happen. It is that it *could* not, and *need* not, happen. The negation has finally to do with theology more than with history. It is no more appropriate for a prophet or servant of God to be so flagrantly worsted as crucifixion involves, than it is for a country's ambassador to be insulted with impunity. Is the sovereignty of God, at stake in the fortunes of its prophetic representative, to be understood as not a match for the machinations of a people like the Jews? Is God so weak and pusillanimous? Does heaven have no resources by which to outwit and thwart a mere Palestinian conspiracy? What does it mean for your view of God, asks the Muslim (recalling the patterns of Meccan triumph), if He be a silent or a helpless spectator at the crucifixion of His representative? (The question goes *a fortiori* if you think that representative His Son.)

It is finally on a view of God that this question truly turns. What happens, ponders the Christian, happens because of the sort of God God is. Not that these transactions in travail mean His powerlessness: rather they are the tokens of His power. It is not that God is less great, by Christian criteria, but that He is differently greater. "Christ crucified is the power and the wisdom of God." If the Cross is what happens when a love like Christ's encounters a world like Jerusalem, it is, by the same token, what happens when Heaven grapples with the human situation. The Christian is well content to have the issue faced in the terms of power the Muslim chooses. Only He begins and ends and moves within a different concept of the power concerned and with what it is about.

Forgiveness of man by such means and in such terms, Islam assures us, need not happen. Is there not a Divine prerogative of forgiveness which operates effortlessly as and when it will? If God wills to forgive

¹ On this point see, for example, Muhammad Kamil Husain: *Qaryah Zalimah*, Cairo, 1954, translated into English by the writer as *City of Wrong, A Friday in Jerusalem*, Amsterdam, 1959.

He forgives: and all this notion of redemption and atonement is superfluous and redundant. Is not all God's willing untrammelled by necessity of method, means, and modes? Sovereignty means precisely meanslessness. "He only says: 'Be' and it is." As it was in creation, so it is in forgiveness. The Christian belief that Divine pardon must needs be associated with some crisis of travail like the Cross is a misunderstanding of the Divine competence, and if persisted in, an affront to the Divine honour. God freely forgives, just like the father in the parable of the prodigal son.

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Here we reach the deepest analysis of the inner antipathy with which we began. Let us agree that the question about Divine forgiveness is not: Whether? We believe alike that God is willing to forgive. The question is How? And here the Gospel parts company with the the Islamic view of omnipotence. It insists that forgiveness is for God a profound problem, that omnipotence here in no sense equals effortlessness, that a prerogative—Heaven being what it is—is also a travail. God just forgives: indeed He does. But the Cross is how He does it. And necessarily so. For forgiveness has to do with relationship. It is a co-relative of repentance. It cannot just be "given" but needs to be received. And receiving it means that there is of necessity a human condition to the whole. It is precisely in relation to the human will to be forgiven that the Cross finds its place in a Divine strategy of forgivingness. There is no place where we so discover the nature of that which needs to be forgiven—and so the will to be—as in the presence of Christ crucified. Such an involvement in the human co-relative of Divine forgivingness will be part of the Divine task in redemption, and thus part of the exercise of its omnipotence.

But forgivingness in any evil situation is necessarily costly in its inward meaning for the forgiver. Take the father in the parable. Truly he "just forgives" and there is seemingly nothing like the Cross there. But how superficial is that seeming! The son resolves on return (here is our link with the preceding paragraph) only because he instinctively assumes that his father has continued all through to be the same sort of father. ("How many hired servants of *my father*" he muses: "I will arise and go to my father" he decides.) But what has continuing to be the same sort of father (and so ensuring the possibility of the boy's return) meant to the father during the absence and the shame? At what cost has he maintained the relationship? Has not the continuity of fatherhood been a continuity of suffering? How could he have escaped feeling the evil unless he had either vowed revenge or repudiated the tie? In either of these alternatives he could have cut his losses or nursed his hatred. But in neither event would he have been truly father, and in neither event could the son have returned into such a situation. Clearly then the feasibility of retrieval is the continuity of love, and both are together a forgivingness in travail.

What is the Cross but this very dimension in the heart of God over the prodigality of the world? An omnipotent prerogative? in heaven's

Name: Yes! But its very omnipotence lies in its capacity to love. The compassion of God verily is the passion of Christ. The Cross is the mode of the Divine omnipotence. The love of the Cross, in the tremendous context of Messianic decision which undertook it, is the fashion and the fact of a Divine mercy, operative in a single historical event in which the love that is God's grapples with the sin that is man's. Did men but know it the Cross is the supreme place where God demonstrates and fulfils the Name by which the Islamic confession always describes Him: "The merciful Lord of mercy."

These are the ultimates of any Christian reckoning with the inner meanings of the Muslim mind. The antipathies are the occasions of ministry: the contrarieties are the points of translation. Our deepest need is to invigorate the Church to the exhilarating dimensions of its mental and spiritual task, and to multiply under God the living witnesses who have caught the vision of their duty in Christ to so great a system of theology and culture as Islam, dominating as it does the juncture of the continents, and standing in unique relation to Christian history. What a different proposition Islam is, if we contrast its antipathies to the Christian Christ, with those of Buddhism or Hinduism. For here we belong with Abraham and Aristotle; we stand in a common heritage from a Hebraic, Græco-Roman, Mediterranean world. The clues for the Christian interpreter lie squarely within the Islamic contradiction to his faith. Our task is to grapple truly with what is contravened in the context of what is agreed, minimizing neither and holding each in a warm, fervent, imaginative devotion to the crucified omnipotence of God.

Have we been unrealistic in preferring these themes to oil and Arab nationalism, Communism and the Middle East, population problems in Egypt and Pakistan, the political struggle for the definition of power, the tension over Africa? Perhaps. But the Church's relation to all these, as part of the living context of its presence amid Islam, will finally hinge upon its devotion to and in the issues we have studied. The biggest "antipathy" we must face is our own insubordination to the Cross of our Lord.