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Mohammed's Misconception of the Trinity

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A student of comparative religion makes this striking remark regarding false religions : 'Of all the systems of belief which have had a widespread hold on mankind this may be posited, that they are commonly true in what they affirm, false in what they deny. The error in every theory is essentially found in its denials, that is its limitations. What it sees is substantial and real, what it does not see is a mark only of limited vision.'¹

In the case of Islam, its denial of the Holy Trinity can be attributed to limited vision. It is not easy to say whether Mohammed himself is to be blamed for it or whether it was entirely due to the misrepresentation of the doctrine by the Christians with whom he came in contact. The fact, however, remains that the heretical ideas about the Trinity expressed by Mohammed were not the concoctions of a prejudiced mind, but rather the clever gleanings of a genius who was able to make capital of whatever distorted ideas he could collect to assert the superiority of Muslim claims.

The Ideas of the Christian Church of Mohammed's Time

It is not our purpose in this essay to show to what extent Mohammed had the opportunity to know the true Christian conception regarding the Trinity, for a good deal has been said on this rather debatable question ; our concern here is to find out to what extent the divided Church of Mohammed's time was responsible for the ideas he used in making his denial of this doctrine.

The most important passages in the Qur'an that have a direct reference to the Trinity occur in Surahs four and five composed by Mohammed towards the end of his career in Madina. Surah 4: 167-170 reads: 'O, ye people of the Book, overstep not the bounds in your religion, and of God speak only the truth. The Messiah, Jesus the Son of Mary, is only an apostle of God, and His Word which He conveyed into Mary and a Spirit proceeding from Himself. Believe therefore in God and his apostles, say not, Three. Forbear—it will be better for you. God is only one God! Far be it from His Glory that He should have a son!' Again Surah 5: 77 says: 'They surely are infidels who say, "God is the third of three" for there is no God but one God: and if they

¹ J. F. Clarke, *Ten Great Religions*, Vol. II, p. 62.

refrain not from what they say, a grievous chastisement shall light on such of them as are infidels.' The third passage in the same Surah is a favourite proof-text used by the Muslims against Christians—'And when God shall say, "O Jesus, Son of Mary: hast thou said unto mankind—'Take me and my mother as two Gods, beside God?''" He shall say—"Glory be unto Thee! it is not for me to say that which I know to be not the truth; had I said that, verily Thou wouldest have known it: Thou knowest what is in me, but I know not what is in Thee; for Thou well knowest things unseen!"' Surah 5:116.

There are three grave errors in the idea of the Trinity represented by these passages. In the first place, the Trinity is regarded as a Triad, for according to the commentator Zamakhshari, Surah 4: 164, quoted above clearly indicates the view 'that God, Christ, and Mary are three Gods, and that Christ is a child (*wald*) of God from Mary.' Secondly, Mary is included as one of the Persons of the Trinity. Thirdly, there is no mention of the Holy Spirit in the Trinity.

From the Quranic quotations regarding the Trinity, it is obvious that Mohammed blames the Christians for holding the views he condemned, and this is the seriousness of the issue. Mohammed is able to get away with a false interpretation of a doctrine which 'is not only fundamental but essential to the very existence of Christianity'. Who were these Christians and how did Mohammed come in contact with them?

In order to trace the heretical influence on Mohammed we must turn to the Church history of Mohammed's time. We find that throughout the fifth and sixth centuries, the Church was faced with severe doctrinal disputes centring round the Persons of the Trinity. The heretical ideas that assumed dangerous proportions at the time were those of the Monophysites, the Nestorians, and a section of the Orthodox Catholic Church which laid undue stress on the veneration of the Virgin Mary. The supporters of these heresies were condemned by the Great Councils, and as circumstances would have it, their leaders found refuge in the countries that were in the neighbourhood of Arabia. By the beginning of the seventh century there were churches within the borders of Arabia founded by these fugitives who crossed over into that country. Mohammed no doubt came in contact with these Christians both within the borders of his own country as well as outside during his commercial travels.

We may briefly look at some of the ideas these persecuted Christians represented. They were most loyal to their convictions, and were not slow to pass on their precious doctrines to others.

The Monophysites were those who recognized only one nature in our Lord, one hypostasis which expressed both the human and divine elements. Their tendency, however, was to emphasize His divinity at the expense of His humanity. Herein lay the evil of the heresy with reference to Mohammed.

The Nestorians believed that in Christ there were not only two natures but two persons of which the one was Divine, even the Eternal Word and the other which was human was the man Jesus; 'that the union between the Son of God and the Son of Man was formed at the moment of the Virgin's conception, and was never to be dissolved'; that it was not a union of nature or person, but only of will and affection, that Christ

was to be carefully distinguished from God, who only dwelt in Him as in His temple.

Both these heresies though very different from each other, gave the impression to Mohammed that the Christians were setting up another God beside Allah. He could not understand the orthodox Christian position regarding Jesus that He Himself was God, Who became man; and so he feels justified in warning the Christians in these words: 'O ye people of the Book, overstep not the bounds in your religion, and of God speak only the truth.' (Surah 4: 167); 'Verily, the likeness of Jesus with God is as the likeness of Adam. He created him from the earth, then He said to him, Be and he was.' (Surah 3: 51); 'Infidels now are they who say, 'Verily, God is the Messiah Ibn Maryam (son of Mary)! Say: And who could aught obtain from God, if He chose to destroy the Messiah Ibn Maryam, and his mother, and all who are on the earth together.' (Surah 5: 19.)

The Heresy Concerning the Virgin Mary

Extraordinary veneration was accorded to the Virgin Mary in Abyssinia, Syria and certain parts of Arabia. Prayers were offered in her name, her image was worshipped and she was regarded as a 'goddess and consort of the Diety'. She was addressed by such names as 'Queen of Heaven' and 'Mother of God'. It was no wonder that Mohammed included her in the Trinity.

Besides these worshippers of Mary, it appears that Mohammed had access to certain apocryphal Gospels such as 'The Nativity of Mary', 'The Protevangelium of the James the Lesser', and the Arabic 'Gospel of the Infancy', which distinctly encouraged false ideas and practices regarding the Virgin Mary. There are several passages in the Qur'an that bear close resemblance to the accounts of such Gospels.

Mohammed failed to include the Holy Spirit in the Trinity because none of these heretical sects presented adequate views regarding the Holy Spirit. He could therefore go no further in his conception of the Holy Spirit than the Jews whom he met in Madina and who regarded the Holy Spirit as the medium of inspiration. The only distinction he could make from the Jewish conception was to confuse the Angel Gabriel with the Holy Spirit, as it was Gabriel who was the appointed medium of the revelations he himself received from Allah.

Mohammed no doubt never heard the true explanation of the Trinity in Unity. Even the learned deputation to him headed by a bishop of the 'Emperor's Faith', that is, of the orthodox Catholic Church, failed to present the true conception of the Trinity, for Ibn Ishaq tells us of these ambassadors, that 'Like all the Christians they said, "Jesus is God, the Son of God, and the third of three"...—They proved that He is the third of the three, namely God, Christ, and Mary.'

We may therefore say, that the tragedy of Islam lies not so much in the fanatical adherence of Mohammed to the rigid unity of Allah, but in the fact that the Church in Mohammed's time failed to represent the true nature of the Triune God. Mohammed was a sincere seeker of truth in the early years of his career. If he had met genuine Christianity in the early formative stage of his religious outlook, the history of Arabia might have been different.