

Jesus through Muslim eyes

By [Tarif Khalidi](#) (for the BBC)

In the year 630 A.D, the Prophet [Muhammad](#) (peace be upon him) achieved one of his most cherished goals: the occupation of Mecca and the subsequent cleansing of the city from idol worship: it was at once a political and a religious victory of immense symbolic importance. Mecca had been declared the centre of the new faith; its conquest was therefore the fulfillment of a divine promise.

Entering the Ka'ba, the square structure which housed the city's idols, Muhammad (pbuh) ordered all its icons cleansed or destroyed. One of the icons in what must have been a very mixed gallery of divinities was a [Virgin](#) and child. Approaching the Christian icon, Muhammad (pbuh) covered it with his cloak and ordered all the others washed away except that one.

Fact or fiction? The question is immaterial. The report I cited is at least 1200 years old and therefore belongs to some of the earliest strata of Muslim historical writing.

What this episode illustrates is the fact that between Islam and the figure of [Jesus Christ](#) there exists a literary tradition spanning a millennium and a half of a continuous historical relationship -- a preoccupation with Jesus that may well be unique among the world's great non-Christian religions. To do full justice to this record, I would need a far larger canvas than the one available to me today. Instead I can only hope to draw a sketch of the contours of that relationship; to point to only a few of its highest peaks, its defining moments.

The [Qur'an](#) is the axial text of Islamic civilization, and it is of course where we must begin for Islam's earliest images of Jesus. Approximately one third of the Quranic text is made up of narratives of earlier prophets, most of them Biblical. Among these prophetic figures, Jesus stands out as the most puzzling. The Qur'an rewrites the story of Jesus more radically than that of any other prophet, and in doing so it reinvents him. The intention is clearly to distance him from the opinions about him current among Christians. The result is surprising to a Christian reader or listener. The Jesus of the Qur'an, more than any equivalent prophetic figure, is placed inside a theological argument rather than inside a narrative. He is very unlike his Gospel image. There is no Incarnation, no Ministry and no [Passion](#). His divinity is strenuously denied either by him or by God directly. Equally denied is his crucifixion. A Christian may well ask, what can possibly be left of his significance if all these essential attributes of his image are gone?

Jesus reinterpreted by the Qur'an is singled out, again and again, as a prophet of very special significance. Uniquely among prophets he is described as a miracle of God, an *aya*; he is the word and spirit of God; he is the prophet of peace par excellence; and, finally it is he who predicts the coming of Muhammad (pbuh) and thus, one might say, is the harbinger of Islam.

How did these earliest images of Jesus grow and develop inside Islamic culture? The Hadith or Prophetic Tradition of Muhammad (pbuh) depicts him as a figure who will come at the end of days to help bring the world to its end. He can now be said to bracket the era of Islam, standing right at its beginning and right at its end. But it is the rapidly growing literary tradition of Islam which now began to embrace the various images of Jesus current in the lands that Islam had conquered. There came together a corpus of sayings and stories attributed to Jesus which in their totality one could call the Muslim Gospel (a collection of these I have just published under the title *The Muslim Jesus*). Let me quote a few of these sayings and stories: "Jesus said, Blessed is he who sees with his heart but whose heart is not in what he sees". Here's another: "Jesus said, The world is a bridge; cross this bridge but do not build upon it". And here's a short exchange: "Jesus met a man and asked him, What are you doing? 'I am devoting myself to God,' the man replied. Jesus asked, 'Who is caring for you?' 'My brother,' said the man. Jesus said, 'Your brother is more devoted to God than you are'." And so it goes on, some three hundred such sayings and stories, which Muslim culture was to ascribe to Jesus across a millennium of continuous fascination with his images and manifestations. At times he is a fierce ascetic, at other times he is the gentle teacher of manners, at yet others the patron of Muslim mystics, the prophet of the secrets of creation, the healer of the wounds of nature and of man.

But back now to my sketch, to just a few other illuminations inside this lengthy historical record. In the tenth century A.D. we have the great Baghdad mystic al-Hallaj, whose life and crucifixion was called "The Passion of al-Hallaj" by the celebrated French Orientalist Massignon. If you want to take my word for it, you would regard him as one of the most Christ-like figures in human history, up there with Socrates, [Gandhi](#) and one or two of the greatest saints of mankind. What made al-Hallaj a Christ-like figure was total absorption in the life of the spirit, a realm lying beyond law, and an exploration of a reality that led him ultimately to claim identity with the divine. But at the same time, there is in him the unshakable willingness to submit to the law, even unto death. So he dies under the law, as it were, in order to rise above it, in order to triumph over the law. Thus, at one time he used to advise his disciples: "Why go on [pilgrimage to Mecca](#)? Build a small shrine inside your own house and circumambulate it in true faith, and it is as if you have performed the pilgrimage." The tension between the letter of the law and the spirit of the law endows the life of Hallaj with a Gospel-like aura, culminating in his trial, his tragic last days and his heart-rending crucifixion. The model of sanctity prefigured by al-Hallaj was to survive most notably inside Muslim mysticism where Jesus was to become a patron saint of Muslim [sufism](#).

But let me move now to later times. The era of the Crusades, a two-hundred year war, pitted European Christian against Western Asian Muslim armies. And here was a chance for Muslim scholars to point to the glaring disparity between Jesus, the prophet of peace, and the barbaric conduct of his so-called followers. In the twelfth century, Jesus was once again reclaimed by Muslim polemics, once again reinvented, if you prefer, in order to stand shoulder to shoulder with the Muslims against his alleged followers. In the battle for the legacy of Jesus, there was no doubt whatsoever in Muslim eyes that the true Jesus belonged to Islam. It was in a sense a replay of the Qur'anic scenario, this time more urgent and dangerous.

As we approach our own days, we observe that many of his earlier manifestations continue to dominate the spiritual horizons of contemporary Islam. Let me speak of only two major images: Jesus the healer of nature and man, and Jesus the Crucified. To encounter Jesus the healer, I invite my listeners to take a trip to the Monastery of Sidnaya north of Damascus or to the Iranian city of Shiraz. The Monastery of Sidnaya was founded by the Byzantine Emperor Justinian in the 6th century AD. It sits on an outcrop of rock high above a valley. To this Monastery travels an endless stream of men and women seeking the blessings and healing of our Lady and her infant son. The vast majority of visitors are Muslim, who come to this Christian shrine as did their ancestors for a thousand years.

A visit to Shiraz might come next. Here, the celebrated city, a treasure house of [Muslim art](#) and [architecture](#) and a garden-city of poets and mystics, is home also to a living Muslim medical tradition of healing, the tradition of the *Masiba-Dam*, the healing breath of Christ. This theme is already reflected in the poetry of the great Persian poet Hafiz, some seven hundred years ago. Thus, in both the literary as well as medical tradition of contemporary Iran, there runs a continuous preoccupation with the healing Christ figure. For [Shii Islam](#), which dominates Iran, the martyrdom of Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), in 682 A.D. is a central spiritual event. And for Shii Islam in particular, the life and death of Christ is a parallel spiritual event. The Christ/Husayn analogy is ever present in the religious sensibility of Shi'i Islam.

I should now make mention of another poet, widely considered the greatest Arab poet of the twentieth century: the Iraqi Badr Shakir al-Sayyab. His life was one of exile, imprisonment, ill health and of total commitment to the cause of the oppressed; his was a poetry utterly Modernist in form but utterly classical in diction. In his verse one will find what is probably the most memorable impact of Christ on modern Arabic/Islamic literature. One poem in particular, entitled *Christ after the Crucifixion* is a Passion, a vision of Christ as lord of nature and redeemer of the wretched of the earth. At the risk of doing violence to its tight structure, I will give only its first and its final stanzas:

After they brought me down, I heard the winds
In a lengthy wail, rustling the palm trees,
And steps fading away. So then, my wounds,
And the Cross upon which they nailed me all afternoon and evening
Did not kill me. I listened. The wail
Was crossing the plain between me and the city
Like a rope pulling at a ship
As it sinks to the sea-bed. The dirge
Was like a thread of light between dawn and midnight,
Upon a grieving winter sky. And the city, nursing its feelings, fell asleep.

I was in the beginning, and in the beginning was Poverty.
I died that bread may be eaten in my name; that they plant me in season.
How many lives will I live! For in every furrow of earth
I have become a future, I have become a seed.
I have become a race of men, in every human heart
A drop of my blood, or a little drop.

After they nailed me and I cast my eyes towards the city
I hardly recognised the plain, the wall, the cemetery;
As far as the eye could see, it was something
Like a forest in bloom. Wherever the vision could reach,
there was a cross, a grieving mother
The Lord be sanctified! This is the city about to give birth.

Badr Shakir al-Sayyab, Christ after the Crucifixion

This is a poem of salvation, political and theological, a poem that interweaves, in a apocalyptic voice, the Jesus of the Gospels and the risen Christ triumphant, a Jesus who is lord of the wretched of the earth and a Christ who is lord and healer of nature. It is a poetic gospel in miniature, a vision of Christ in suffering and ultimately in victory.

So: I think it can safely be shown that Islamic culture presents us with what in quantity and quality are the richest images of Jesus in any non-Christian culture. No other world religion known to me has devoted so much loving attention to both the Jesus of history and to the Christ of eternity. This tradition is one that we need to highlight in these dangerous, narrow-minded days. The moral of the story seems quite clear: that one religion will often act as the hinterland of another, will lean upon another to complement its own witness. There can be no more salient example of this interdependence than the case of Islam and Jesus Christ. And for the Christian in particular, a love of Jesus may also mean, I think, an interest in how and why he was loved and cherished by another religion.

Document source: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/beliefs/isa.shtml>