

“Jesus and Islam”

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**First Presbyterian Church
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Hebrews 12:14
James 2:17-26; 4:13-17**

I had lunch on Friday with community friends, which included, my good friend Mahmoud Fahmy. As usual we all enjoyed our time together. I say that without fear of contradiction – due to the immense amount of laughter around the table. Of course we discussed the traditional taboos – Religion and Politics. (How naïve that - saying that “they don’t mix”. Historical Alert: They don’t mix if there is a basic agreement on the foundational axioms of a culture/society. In other words – if we all adhere to accepted norms – don’t mix religion and politics – because that conversation will be about sectarian issues – and let’s keep those to ourselves – our own denominations and political parties. Alas – the historical bubble – has burst – and axiomatic foundational matters are front and center.)

During the engaging conversation – Mahmoud reminded us once again, a mantra he has expressed on numerous occasions (Repetition is a primary teaching tool). He said, “My brothers, without Judaism, there would be no Christianity, and without Christianity there would be no Islam.” We all nodded in ascent. Of course Mahmoud was declaring that these three religions have a shared history, and dependency, at least referring to Christianity and Islam. We are all derivative of what has been termed the Abrahamic faiths. This Abram was called by this God to leave his home in Mesopotamia and go West, with his family – to what became Israel – on the far eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea. Abram, renamed Abraham – journeyed and that story, that narrative has changed the world!

Those “ipri” (dusty people), Hebrews, Jews – begat Judaism; ethical Monotheism. The Jewish Jesus – The Messiah/Son of God, birthed Christianity, expanding beyond the Jewish people. Mahammed, (several centuries later) became Alah’s (God’s) prophet to the Arabs. Mahammed – heard Allah’s voice through his interactions with Jews and Christians and their scriptures. The Koran was revealed. You would be amazed the amount of Biblical figures and stories that are in the Koran! There are adjustments, which makes the differences among us clear. But, again hopefully all our differences, via axioms of ethics and living in peaceful community will win out in today’s increasing struggle among the religions and cultures of the world.

I am going to risk making a statement that I believe is true, but might not feel comfortable. Most people living in America and Europe know too little about the faith that has gifted them with the freedoms and life’s enjoyments they possess. That faith is Christianity (and concomitant – Judaism). We’ve been able to neglect our learning these past generations, living on the cultural bounty stored up for us over the previous generations (kind of like Joseph’s instructions to Pharaoh about a coming famine, and how to store up food for the future. Joseph saved Egypt and Israel!)

The time has arrived for us to relearn our historic religious and cultural lessons. This will take time, but it is necessary. The storage grain is running low!

We also need to know about the “others” who live on this ever shrinking world of transportation and technology. And primary among the “others” are those who are Muslims. They too have a

complicated and diverse history, yet there is a form of coherence to Islam, just as there is to Judaism and Christianity.

As I have shared before: Christians make up 31% of the world's population, and Islam 23%. Together we account for 54% of all people in our world!

Which brings me to Jesus and Islam.

What I am about to share with you is but a few drops of water to begin to fill up the cistern of knowledge toward increased understanding, and hopefully eventual comity.

In my recent studies I came across a Muslim journalist, Mustafa Aykol, who writes for the International New York Times, and who has authored a new book, titled The Islamic Jesus: How the King of the Jews Became a Prophet of the Muslims.

Mr. Aykol shares in the New York Times:

What is the trouble with Islam? Why are there so many angry Muslims in the world who loathe the West? Why do self-declared Islamic states impose harsh laws that oppress minorities, women and "apostates"? Why are there terrorists who kill in the name of Allah? Many in the West have been asking these kinds of questions for decades. Answers have varied from claiming that there is no problem within Islam today, which is to defensive, to asserting that Islam itself is a huge problem for the world, which is unfair and prejudiced.

In his book The Islamic Jesus, he offers a way for Abraham's children to coexist. To a large degree he has done his homework, and his effort should be appreciated. He sees Jesus as the focus for increased mutual understanding. "Whether we are Jews, Christians, and Muslims, we either share a faith followed, by him, a faith built on him, or a faith that vernerates him", he declares at the start of his book.

If one is at all open to dialogue and understanding a better opening sentence would be difficult to create. Of course he recognizes there are differences. Neither Judaism nor Islam see Jesus as Son of God, but Mustafa doesn't see this as sufficient to close the door, and go to our separate houses of worship and communities. "I'm with you Mr. Akyol! Let's proceed!"

A few years back when he was in Istanbul (formally Constantinople), his home city, he met a friend at a busy café (sadly, it wasn't a Starbucks). It was call "Independence" (a great name!). It was filled with tourists, urbanites and various political activists. There were the communists, wearing red shirts, with large yellow letters spelling out a specific brand of the "People's Party". There was a group of Kurdish mothers on the street, mourning for their sons, victims of "counterterrorism." Then he met up with a smiling young man who asked, "Hello, sir, have you ever read the Good News?", and handed him a small book titled "Incil" – "Gospel".

That evening he began reading the Bible. What caught his attention was the great similarity with his own Islamic faith. He especially related to the letter of James. The foundational demand, call to "do good works" reverberated in his heart and mind. James is consonant with Islam, was his revelation! He sees Paul and his writings as taking Christianity in the wrong direction, this declaring Jesus Christ as Son of God.

But through Mr. Akyol's theological studies he finds sufficient Christian studies - that criticize Paul and his push for "faith over works", and the divination of Jesus from Messianic savior, to God. His

particularized uses of sources, exhibits his Muslim stance of Jesus as prophet, but not God. Understandable but, if meant for Christian reading he might have not been so “James/Paul dichotomy.”

There is no doubt that there was an evolving of understanding of who Jesus was and is, from our beginnings – but Mr Akyol’s apologetics via the true Jesus is not only the Islamic Jesus (as presented in the Koran), but is also the Jesus of the early Christianity that sees no divinity (Ebionites). As his is I believe sincerely trying to find rapprochement between Christianity and Islam – he is giving us a Christology of a human Jesus, without divinity – to follow.

Of course James is worthy of emulating; works are fundamental! Just holding a belief is not enough! Jews and Christians have adhered to this from the beginning! The faith issue with Paul, is contextual with the developing inclusion of Gentiles into the Jewish movement. It was never meant to be an either/or.

To move one: What I find most helpful and instructive is his approach to his fellow Muslims (I grant, that as they read his book, and I hope they do, his rendition of the human, moral Jesus, will draw them further to where he is taking them). He challenges his fellow believers to look at the Jesus of the Koran (where Jesus appears in 93 verses in 15 different Koranic chapters). His thesis is that the teachings of Jesus are crucial if Muslims are to live correctly in this world!

Quoting from his book:

Jesus was blaming these self-righteous pietists for their obsession with the minute details of the Halakha, while neglecting moral teaching that relate to the spirit. This sounded extremely similar to attitudes I see among some contemporary self-righteous Muslim pietists, who admonish fellow believers for not fully observing the minute details of Shariah, or Islamic law, but neglect the moral teachings that relate to the spirit.

Everything Jesus said in the passage below, for example, sounded very relevant to me and my own world of Muslim legalists: (Then he quotes Matthew’s Gospel) “But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and every herb, and neglect justice and the love of God; these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. Woe to you Pharisees! For you love the best seat in the synagogues and salutations in the market places. Woe to you! For you are like graves which are not seen, and men walk over them without knowing it.” One of the lawyers answered him, “Teacher, in saying this you reproach us also.” And he said, “Woe to you lawyers also! For you load men with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers.”

Now – that’s powerful! (Notwithstanding the issue of contextualizing the use of “Pharisees”, in the negative). But, indicting today’s “world of Muslim legalists” via – Jesus words in Matthew’s gospel – to and for Islam is huge!

And how about this! Mr Aykol introduces Lk 17:21 “The Kingdom of God is within you”, interpreting that Jesus has transformed the Kingdom of God, from a political kingdom to a spiritual Kingdom. Thus, no longer do the (Muslims) need the Caliphate. This is his interpretation, not mine! “Hence it is possible for Muslims today to abandon the commitment to the Caliphate as a political entity, but strive to be better caliphs on earth – as individuals with God-given faculties and responsibilities. It is possible for Muslims to think, in other words, that the Caliphate is not here or there, but within themselves.”

Talk about Revolutionary!!

He wants Muslims to follow Jesus through his moral principles rather than obsessing over the minute of details of religious law, such as Shariah and fighting for theocratic rule. How about this? “The Shariah is made for man, not man for the Shariah”!

He concludes:...we Muslims are not living in the context of seventh-century Mecca and Medina. We are rather living in the context of first-century Nazareth and Jerusalem. Therefore, we need a “prophetic example” fit for the first-century drama. We need the method, and the message, of Jesus. Isn’t it none other than Jesus after all, whose very “return is promised in our tradition?”

Here are his concluding words of direction and hope for his fellow Muslims:

As Muslims, who are latecomers to this scene, we have disagreements with both Jews and Christians. But we have major agreements as well. With Jews, we agree a lot on God. With Christians, we agree that Jesus was born of a virgin, that he was the Messiah, and that he is the Word of God. Surely, we do not worship Jesus, like Christians do. Yet still, we can follow him. In fact, given our grim malaise and his shining wisdom, we need to follow him.

May peace be among the followers of Islam and their neighbors. And may Mr Akyols’ book be read by millions of Muslims!

In the name of Jesus!

Amen.