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Encounter with Jesus in Popular Islam

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A young Egyptian wife and mother named Hanân suffered from a painful stomach illness. It was eventually diagnosed as cancer. Hanân was twenty-seven years of age and her wealthy husband encouraged her to look for medical assistance. None could be found which would deal with the disease that was gradually killing her. Finally, some members of Hanân's family encouraged her to pray to Jesus, the Christians' Jesus, for he is famous for his healing powers. So Hanân prayed to Jesus and was healed. As a result, Hanân started to talk with an orthodox Christian neighbour and to learn more about the Christian faith. After a year, the Orthodox Christian friend introduced Hânân to another (Protestant) Christian who explained the gospel in greater clarity to her. A few weeks later Hanân was baptized.

This encounter with Jesus of a provincial, Egyptian Muslim provokes an enquiry into the understanding which ordinary Muslims have of the Christians' Christ. How do Muslims see Jesus? Where in their cosmological map does he fit? Can a grasp of the view of Jesus in popular Islam help the Christian to communicate more understandingly and effectively with his Muslim neighbour?

Our starting-point, in seeking to answer such questions, will be with the ordinary Muslim himself. The primary aim is to reconstruct a picture of the world as he looks out upon it, to comprehend his cosmological map. The second step will be to examine the place of Jesus in that cosmology. The final task will be to suggest a rationale for patterns of encounter between Jesus Christ and the ordinary Muslim.

A COSMOLOGICAL MAP OF POPULAR ISLAM

In this exploration of popular Muslim belief and practice, the aim is to look behind the surface attitudes and actions to the assumptional models which provoke and justify those attitudes and actions. examples are given from an Egyptian context though they could be multiplied from around the Muslim world. A cosmology of popular Islam appears to cohere in terms of two major concepts, those of power and of being. Concepts of power abound in the Muslim consciousness and a major distinction may be made in terms of the location of the force concerned either in this world or in the world beyond. *Quadr* (fate) is an example of an other-worldly force that bears upon human life. Usually only appreciated in hindsight, the operation of this concept applies in everyday life usually at moments of extreme **P. 248** crisis. The death of a child in a road accident may be explained as the result of the operation of fate and charges of manslaughter against the driver may be dropped by the parents of the deceased child. More common concepts of force are found in the immediate, tangible universe. These may range from the effect of herbs or drugs, often employed at times of crisis, rites to keep away evil spirits or harm. to that of magic or sorcery. These latter forces are deliberately sought at the hands of recognized practitioners to effect changes in other human beings' lives. An example would be the use of love magic. Astrology and divination are seen as strong powers in ordinary Muslims' lives. The tendency for women to be especially involved as practitioners in the appropriating of these forces is common: a mother-in-law, a midwife, or a *shaykha*. Fortunetellers (masculine *‘arrâf*, feminine *‘arrâfa*) are common in villages, towns and

cities. The vaguely complementary concepts of *baraka*¹ and evil eye exemplify highly motivational aspects of popular Muslim cosmology as they impinge on everyday living. Returnees from the *hajj*² to Mecca are met off boat and airplane by relatives anxious to wipe their hands immediately over the pilgrims' faces and clothes in order to transfer to themselves the accumulated *baraka* of Islam's most holy places. The peculiar Egyptian *mushâhara* syndrome, a rather specific manifestation of the evil eye concept, leads to quite complex observance of taboos in ordinary Muslim homes. The largest operation of such taboo occurs in regard to the visiting by certain persons of a nursing mother and to the bringing of certain substances into the home of someone in a state of 'sacred vulnerability' (Kennedy, 1967:690ff.). Many other concepts of power operate strongly in society. These include omens, vows, curses blessings, the vast world of prophylaxis (amulets, charms, talismans etc.) and the highly motivational forces of dreams and visions. In everyday encounter with Muslims the recognition of such powers cannot but be noticed, whether it is in observing the protective use to the 'hand of Fâtima', or in sensing the concentration of hope at the *şandûq al-nudhûr* (box of vows) in a shrine, or in listening to an explanation of events in terms of 'so-and-so visited Badî'a in her dreams ...' The concepts of force which inform a cosmology of the ordinary Muslim may be empirical (such as drugs or other natural forces) but the majority are transempirical, with visions and dreams forming a bridge between the two realms. Certainly all such powers, except perhaps that of fate, are accessible to ordinary Muslims either immediately or via professional practitioners. P. 249

The cosmology of popular Muslim religion is equally generated by concepts of being or personal life. Myths of origin and *ḥadîth*³ place the creation of mankind in the context of a larger world of supernatural beings. The transempirical world especially is filled with many kinds of being. God himself of course heads the category of being in popular Muslim religion. Archangels, angels and devils are also conceived of as existing and having effect in the lives of mortals. Angels touch Egyptian bedouin life, for example, in the matter of control of the earth: *kull shibr rain al-ard mar'î* (every span of the ground is under custody). Such angels are understood as being intensely jealous of the ground that belongs to them. So the bedouin of Sinai carefully obtain leave from the angels before pitching a tent or lying on the ground. otherwise an attack from the angels, known as *amr ardîya* (a decree from the ground) could result in rheumatism or even madness (Bailey, 1982:68). Jinn people a universe which mirrors the human reality and constantly threaten the balance of life. Both named and unnamed jinn exist. In Egypt Um al-Şubyân is recognized as a named jinn that especially attacks pregnant or parturient women and their offspring. Certain precautions are taken before, during, and for forty days after, birth to prevent harm of Um al-Şubyân from touching a family. Prophets are seen as living beings of the transempirical world who may help ordinary Muslims in their everyday living and in their prospects of attaining paradise at death. The pronouncing of the *taşliya*, the *quyyâm* (standing to chant praise of the prophet Muhammad) at *Mawlid al-Nabî* and other festivals, the recitation of religious *qaşîdas*⁴ and the use of prophets' names in talismans, all seek to employ the positive qualities of these persons, especially Muḥammad, on behalf of the contemporary Muslim. Dead saints and the shrines associated with them are seen

¹ *baraka*: literally 'blessing; benediction or charisma from God'.

² *hajj*: pilgrimage.

³ *ḥadîth*: 'tradition' in Islam.

⁴ *qaşîda*: traditional Arabic poem.

as bearing considerably on the wellbeing in this life of the ordinary Muslim. Sayyid Aḥmad Badawī's mausoleum in Tanṭa in the Nile delta is the focus of pilgrimage several times a year. The shrines Ḥusayn, Shâfī, Zainab and Nafīsa in Cairo are frequently visited by Muslims seeking access to supernatural help in the pressure of immediate issues. Many other local saints' shrines throughout the country are also frequented. *Zâr* spirits, representing a phenomenon of possession in which the resulting procedure is to learn to live in relationship with the spirit as opposed to expelling it, are common beings in the cosmology of the ordinary Muslim. Fakhouri describes some instances of *zâr* possession and resultant relationship in a village situation some eighteen miles south of Cairo (1972:92–95). *Zâr* p. 250 celebrations remain common, though banned by law, amongst women of most social classes. Other named spirits, the familiar spirit, souls of the recently dead (on whose behalf at the grave and at certain intervals after death various ceremonies are performed) fill out the world of living beings in its transempirical manifestation. Within that world, some beings (most notably God himself and possibly the archangels and angels) exhibit other-worldly qualities. The rest belong more nearly to the tellurian domain.

Our brief exposition of a cosmology of popular Islam may be summarized in Figure 1.

In the cosmology of popular Muslim religion there is a plethora of being and a wealth of power. The personalities and forces emerge as being in constant tension. Life consists of avoiding negative influences and of harnessing positive ones in order for the Muslim man or woman to maintain a balanced position in the world of 'being'.

JESUS IN POPULAR ISLAM

Jesus, of course, 'fits' primarily into the concept of 'being' in the cosmological map of the ordinary Muslim. But the question of precisely where he fits within that concept is of importance for it determines the extent to which he may be appealed to for assistance, and it controls the range of powers to which he may have access. In these paragraphs, Jesus' place in the cosmology of popular Islam is deduced from *ḥadīth*, and most specifically from those collections made by al-Bukhārī and Muslim. Reference is also made to al-Thaʿlabī's *Stories of the Prophets* and al-Ghazzālī's *The Revivification of the Religious Sciences*, for in these sources were deliberately gathered together some of the traditions concerning Jesus.

The *ḥadīth* interpret and uphold the Qur'ānic view that Jesus takes a place inferior to, and altogether separate from, God. As far as essential being is concerned the gulf is surely fixed. Jesus is titled in the Qur'ān 'a spirit from Him' and 'his Word which He cast upon Mary' (Sura 4:169).⁷ The *ḥadīth* uphold this strong distinction:

'Narrated ʿUbbāda: The Prophet said, If anyone testifies that None has the p. 251

⁷ Let us note that even with regard to Qur'ānic interpretation *per se*, it would be erroneous, in reflecting on the 'Word' of this sura and sura 3:40, to predicate a Western, Greek-based *logos* concept into that 'Word'. ʿalī suggests in his commentary on this verse [171] that *kalima* is here equivalent to 'prophecy' (1951:234; note 652). This prophecy God cast (*ilqāʾ*) in the sense of 'communicated' to Mary, *Rûḥ* he interprets as 'mercy'. Alī makes the further point that even if *kalima* means literally 'word' and *rûḥ* means literally 'spirit', at most it can only indicate 'a word' and 'a spirit'.

Figure 1 The Cosmology of Popular Muslim Religion

CONCEPTS OF POWER		CONCEPTS OF BEING	
↑ ↑ OTHER-WORLDLY ↓	<u>qadr</u> books: especially Qur'ân	Allah archangels: Sarafî'îl Jibrâ'îl others angels: of no sex, good, created of light	↑ ↑ TRANSEMPYRICAL ↓
	magic sorcery astrology divination <u>baraka</u> <u>dhikr</u> ⁵ evil eye omens vows curses blessings prophylaxes (dreams) (visions) (sleep) herbs drugs other natural forces	devils: Iblîs others Jinn: sexed; many kinds, usually bad prophets: apostles prophets messengers dead saints: good <u>zâr</u> spirits Un al-Sabyân etc. <u>garîna</u> ⁶ ancestors souls of recently dead living holy men humans: Muslim: male female others animals plants: wheat (bread) others	
↓ ↓ THIS-WORLDLY ↑			↓ ↓ EMPIRICAL ↑

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right to be worshipped but Allâh Alone Who has no partners, and that Muhammad is His Slave and His Apostle, and that Jesus is Allâh's Slave and His Apostle and His Word which He bestowed on Mary and a Spirit created by Him and that Paradise is true, and Hell is true, Allâh will admit him into Paradise with the deeds which he had done even if those deeds were few.'

(al-Bukhârî, 1979:429)

Abû Sa'îd al-Khudrî reports a *ḥadîth* concerning the day of resurrection:

'... Then the Christians would be summoned and it would be said to them: What did you worship? They would say: 'We worshipped Jesus, son of Allah. It would be said to them: You talk a lie; Allah did not take for Himself either a spouse or a son ... They would fall in the Fire, till no one is left in life except he who worshipped Allah, be he pious or sinful.'

(Muslim, 1976:117)

So Jesus is definitely non-divine. But it is not so clear as to whether the Jesus of folk-Islamic cosmology is truly of this world or whether he is other-worldly. On the one hand, Jesus is a prophet in the same manner as Muḥammad:

'Narrated Abû Huraira: I heard Allâh's Apostle saying; I am the nearest of all the people to the son of Mary, and all the prophets are paternal brothers, and there has been no prophet between me and him (i.e. Jesus).'

(al-Bukhârî, 1979:434)

Jesus is a man, like other men:

'Narrated Abû Huraira [concerning the Prophet's ascension to heaven by night]: I met Jesus. The Prophet described him saying, He was one of moderate height and was red-faced as if he had just come out of a bathroom.'

(Ibid:431)

‘Narrated Ibn ‘Umar: The Prophet said, I saw Moses, Jesus and Abraham (on the night of my Ascension to the heavens). Jesus was of red complexion, curly hair and a broad chest ...’

(*Ibid*:432)

Like other men, Jesus would err:

‘[from Abû Huraira]: Allah’s Messenger said: Jesus son of Mary saw a person committing theft: thereupon Jesus said to him: You committed theft. He said: Nay. By Him besides Whom there is no god (I have not committed theft). Thereupon Jesus said: I affirm my faith in Allah. It is my own self that deceived me.’

(Muslim, 1976:1262) p. 253

On the other hand, there are some unique qualities about Jesus. At his birth, Satan was outwitted and Jesus stands as the only human being not ‘touched’ or ‘struck’ by the evil one:

‘Abû Huraira reported Allah’s Messenger as saying: ... Every person to whom his mother gives birth (has two aspects of his life); when his mother gives birth Satan strikes him but it was not the case with Mary and her son (Jesus Christ).’

(*Ibid*:1399; cf. al-Bukhârî, 1979:426)

Miraculously, Jesus spoke from his cradle to correct others’ misconceptions, the *ḥadîth* literature here underlying a point made in the Qur’ân itself (Sura 28; cf. al-Bukhârî, 1979:430). Jesus is especially remembered as a healer and miracle-worker:

‘Ka’b al-Akbar said: Jesus, son of Mary, was a ruddy man, inclined to white; he did not have long hair, and he never anointed his head. Jesus used to walk barefoot, and he took no house or adornment, or goods, or clothes, or provision except his day’s food. Wherever the sun set, he arranged his feet in prayer till the morning came. He was curing the blind from birth and the leper and raising the dead by Allah’s permission and was telling his people what they were eating in their houses and what they were storing up for the morrow, and he was walking on the surface of the water in the sea. His head was dishevelled and his face was small; he was an ascetic in the world, longing for the next world and eager for the worship of Allah. He was a pilgrim in the earth till the Jews sought him and desired to kill him. Then Allah raised him up to heaven; and Allah knows best.’

(Quoted in Rahim, 1979:222)

Jesus now dwells in the second heaven (Muslim, 1976:105) and with his descent will come the end of the world and judgment (al-Bukhârî, 1979:436f.). At that time he will break crosses, kill swine and abolish the *jizya*⁸ (Muslim, 1976:1517–1520). Meanwhile, from his place in heaven Jesus is accessible for intercession. Muslim cites a *ḥadîth* in which Jesus is approached as a potential intercessor but proves to be inadequate (1976:131). Rahim quotes another *ḥadîth* in which Jesus’ powers as intercessor appear to be quite considerable:

‘It is related that Jesus, peace be upon him, one day passed a hill in which he saw a cell. He drew near it and found in it a devotee whose back was bent, whose body was wasted, and in whom austerity had reached its utmost limits. Jesus saluted him and wondered at his evidences (of devotion) which he saw. So Jesus said to him, “How long have you been in p. 254 this place?” He replied, “For seventy years I have been asking Him for one thing which he Has not granted me yet. Perhaps you, O Spirit of Allah, may intercede for me concerning

⁸ *jizya*: a tax payable by a community which accepts the protection of a Muslim ruler but whose members do not embrace Islam.

it; then possibly it may be granted.” Jesus said, “What is your requirement?” He replied, “I asked Him to let me taste the amount of an atom of His pure love.” Jesus said to him, ‘I shall pray to Allah for you about that.’ So he prayed for him that night, and Allah, Exalted is He, revealed to him, “I have accepted your intercession and granted your request.” ...’

(1979:226)

Jesus, from his position in the heavens, and as a result of the person he is, plays the role of successful mediator for the devotee. In such respects, Jesus is more than an ordinary mortal. In other respects Jesus is definitely angelic. A *ḥadīth* from Wahab relates:

‘So when God commanded Jesus to come down to [Mary Magdalene] seven days after His ascension, He came down upon her, and a mountain burned with light when He came down. So the disciples gathered together, and He sent them out into the world to call men to God. Then God took Him up, and clothed Him with feathers and covered Him with light; and deprived Him of all desire for food and drink. And He flies with the angels around the throne. So He is human and angelic, and earthly and heavenly.’

(al-Thaḥṭabī, 1865:255; quoted in Zwemer, 1912:105)

As prophet, as angelic, as ‘Spirit’, as miracle-worker, healer, raiser of the dead, as untouched by Satan, as mediator-intercessor, Jesus fills a place in the folk-Islamic cosmology which is transempirical and potentially other-worldly. Rickards concludes from his study of the Jesus of the Qur’ān, *tafsīr*⁹ and *ḥadīth*:

‘Īsā was not a man in the sense that human beings are men. He never lost his creature-status but retained his spirit nature. This was distinct from the nature of angels although he shared with them, as he did with the men to whom he ministered, many apparent qualities.’

(1969:194)

Sometimes, it seems, the manifestations of Jesus’ creature status proved stronger, sometimes those of his spirit nature. The existence of this being in the cosmological map of popular Islam invites petition and trust.

CONCLUSIONS

In the cosmological map, then, of the ordinary Muslim, Jesus occupies a special position as a unique being Non-divine, created, he may be. **P. 255** But as creature, his remarkable birth, his rôle at judgment time, his Special relation to Muḥammad, his power over disease, death and nature, his angelic and spirit-like qualities, his ability to mediate before God, his superior relationship to Satan—all speak of a special person. The cosmology of the ordinary Muslim, as with the strict tenets of Qur’ānic exegesis, allows no possibility of a God/Man, of a mediator in the sense of divine incarnation. But it would seem that Jesus’ unique person and position invite the devotion and petitions of ordinary Muslims as they find themselves in disequilibrium. Jesus stands out as a person/prophet/angel/spirit who can be touched by their needs and who has power in himself or access to power in order to aid them.

So Jesus is appealed to for healing, as in the case of Ḥanān. So Jesus is included as a potent name in amulets and talismans. Gimlette quotes a Malay charm cure for sufferers from poison in which the Brahminical intonation of ‘Om’ is combined with invocation of

⁹ *tafsīr*: science of exegesis of the Qur’ān.

the name of Allah. Jesus is named as father of the charm, guarantor of the success of this spell:

‘Om! This is a powerful charm!
The charm of the hundred and ninety [diseases].
Not my own spell, but that of all that is deadly!
Poison! well wot I thee born of the deadly water,
Born of the green and deadly berry!
Fain would I charm thee from out this body!
Obey not and I will curse thee with the cursings of
Jesus, father of all the charm.
In the name of Allah.’

(1929:52; quoted in Osman, 1967:145)

Within the beliefs and practices of ordinary Muslims, appeal is already being made to Jesus. Maybe that appeal is as superstitious or inadequate as the touching of Jesus cloak by the woman with an issue of blood ([Matthew 9:20ff.](#)). But within the cosmological map of the ordinary Muslim it is not unnatural for that Muslim to turn to Jesus in times of disequilibrium.

In the Christian’s encounter with ordinary Muslims it would appear appropriate to emphasize the miraculous birth of Jesus, his authority over Satan, his healing and deliverance ministries, his raising of the dead, his ‘nature miracles’, his existence now in heaven and his return at the time of judgment. But equally emphasized must be his authority *today* to act on behalf of mankind, to intervene miraculously in crises or situations of disequilibrium. The Jesus of popular Islam must come ‘p. 256 alive’ as the Lord of all in men and women’s experience in their contemporary circumstances. Jesus’ demonstrated ability to meet felt-needs may be a starting-point for ordinary Muslims, close to their own appreciation of him, from which they can move, as the healed Ḥanân did, to fuller understanding, faith and obedience. The emphasis is thus concentrated as much upon the experiential as upon the cognitive as far as ordinary Muslims are concerned. The hope of making such accommodation to the worldview of the ordinary Muslim lies, happily, in the strong promise of Holy Spirit-enabled communicating of a life-changing, experience-oriented, gospel. The final question then becomes: are Christians really faithful encounter-bearers of their living Lord?

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Modern Technology: Idol or Divine Gift?

Paul Marshall

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The topic of technique and technology is massive. Technique refers to 'how-to' do something—it is the science of 'how'. It encompasses all that we can do—from going to the moon to public speaking, from thermo-nuclear bombs to making love, from serving our starving neighbour to writing articles. All of these are included when we talk about technique.

The correlate of technique is technology, which is the reified, made, created, embodied structure of technique. Technology includes, in one form or another, all those things which are not *naturally* occurring, all those things which we shape and reshape. Technology infuses art as much as physics, families as much as engineering.

Hence, to talk about technique and technology is to talk in a particular way about all of human life, as all of human life has a technical aspect. This is obviously a big undertaking. So, in order to bring the subject down to size, I will talk about technology only in one way—a 'religious' way. This means I will not talk about what such things as computers (or communications technology, or nuclear fusion or fission, or cloning, or genetic manipulation, or oil sands plants) do or might do. Rather, I will focus on technology as a basic aspect of our lives. I will focus on our commitment and trust in it, on the vision of life it embodies, and the type of world and type of people we are making through technology.