

## **The Death of Jesus as Crucial Difference between Islam and Christianity Reflections on the Sociology of Religion**

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Recently in Germany a child asked me if Jesus was a mythical figure like Santa Claus or if he really existed. I replied that there is virtually no difference of opinion among humans from different culture backgrounds that Jesus lived on this earth; but to be fair, I had to add that there are two diametrically opposed opinions on how he died. This does not refer to whether or not one believes in the resurrection. Instead the different views on Jesus' death are a consequence of the teachings of Islam that Allah would never allow one of his prophets - and Muslims of course count Jesus among the prophets - to be tortured and killed in the way it is reported in the Christian New Testament. The majority of the classic Muslim commentators of the Koran teach that prior to the crucifixion Jesus was elevated by Allah and that miraculously another man was killed in his place.

To explain how this came about, the possibility is mentioned by Koran scholars that Allah made another man look so similar to Jesus that an involuntary error resulted in his replacement. There are several different answers to the question, who was determined to take the place of Jesus. Some mention Judas as the one who seemed to have deserved that fate. The translators of the Koran take pains to find a solution. About the death of Jesus one explanation reads, that it did in fact not occur but rather "they were merely made believe that it happened" (Ibn Rassoul), or that "they succumbed to a state of uncertainty" (Adel Theodor Khoury), or "rather another person appeared to look so similar" that they thought he was Jesus and killed that other person (Rudi Paret), or "by the will of Allah he appeared to them to be" Jesus. (Source: Center on Islam, Munich, Germany).

The most convincing solution to the problem of translation is the one suggested by Manfred Ullmann, who writes „they became victims of an error,“ thereby circumventing the difficulty of determining who deceived whom in what way. The text of the Koran clarifies moreover that the claim of the Jewish contemporaries of Jesus to have affected his being killed, is proof of their unbelief. According to Muslim teaching, the Jews planned ways to accuse and eliminate Jesus, but Allah superseded their "evil machinations" and elevated Jesus to heaven directly. As I already mentioned, according to the Koran it is impossible in principle that Allah's prophet who exists under the mission and protection of God can be brutally killed by humans.

The verses about the crucifixion can be found in the Koran in Sura 4, 155: "They were cursed (the people of the book, here referring to the Jews) because they committed a breach of their obligations, because they denied the Signs given by God, and because they killed the prophets against the law... 156 and because they did not believe but pronounced a great defamation against Mary; 157 and because they said: We have killed Jesus the Christ, the son of Mary, the messenger of God." According to these statements, sacred to Islam, the Jews are not guilty of having killed Jesus for his crucifixion never happened but they are guilty of having claimed, contrary to the truth, that they caused Jesus' death.

It is hard to explain from the point of view of the scholarly study of religion, why these conflicting statements involving the three Abrahamic religions on such a crucial topic as the death of Jesus have not been debated in the context of sociology. Admittedly, a sociologist engaged in the comparative study of the religions of the world can only be true to his calling as a scholar if he refrains from commenting on contents of faith. Yet, obviously, he cannot avoid working with contents of faith as data, because they are the definitions of the reality of the respective religion. Scholarship is not in a position to evaluate religious statements, except by asking if there exists an inner consistency between them. The guarantee that a given content which comes into question is actually a reality, can only be given by the vast collective of millions of faithful sharing a particular faith, in the case of the death of Jesus, Islam or Christianity respectively.

Contrary to the type of knowledge typical for the natural sciences that can be confirmed by an isolated individual in a laboratory experiment, knowledge about such matters as the death of Jesus can only be confirmed and made appear reliable to the individual by the consensus among the members of the religious body in question. As a result, accepting certain content of faith as describing a reality becomes as it were a badge of membership: If you do not think that Jesus was killed on the cross, you cannot be a Christian; if on the other hand, you think Jesus was killed on the cross, you cannot be a Muslim. To the sociologist, it is as simple as that, and it does not even touch on the subjects, who of the two statements are objectively true; to clarify that, would be a task for historical research, not sociological.

Religion in general is a way of producing realities about life and death; it is about being born and dying. In the context of Christianity beginning and end of the life of mortals are symbolized at Christmas as the celebration of nativity and of GoodFriday followed by Easter as the celebration of death and its consequences. Sociologist of religion may in their personal lives be Christians, or Muslims, or members of any one of the many other religions, but they cannot limit their academic work to only one religion, and certainly not to their own. Sociologists must study them all or at least several religions in comparison. Other religions have no Christmas, or as is the case for Islam have no death on the cross, but they each have their own way of worshipping the process of coming to life and of initiation into immortality through death, in some contexts through suicide. From the perspective of sociology, religions supply a bridge that has the potential of connecting this secular world in which the mortals exist, to the sacred beyond, in which immortals are believed to have their home. Whether or not there is anything at the other end of that bridge, and in case there is something, other than nothing, what the realities at the other end my look like, that questions is outside the competence and scope of sociology, or, for that matter, of any scholarly discipline working with empirical data.

The metaphor of the bridge, which of course has entered into such words as pontifex (bridgemaker, from the Latin word pons = bridge) for a high ranking priest; (and Julius Caesar - prior of his being murdered - had the title of pontifex maximus of the Roman Empire) presupposes a dualistic religious definition of reality. It is assumed that under normal conditions the sacred sphere of the beyond is inaccessible, and that it is the rare and special competence of the pontifex, or shaman, or other type of priest, to reach over there and establish communication with the holy personages who as deities and immortals reside in the beyond. The high esteem and respected rank of such priestly or shamanistic mortals rests upon the premise that they can reliably be interlocutors and communicators with deities and other immortals. Moses, for instance, is believed to have spoken face to fact with God. And priests and priestesses of all cultures and religions were and are given credit for being endowed with similar abilities.

But the respective sacred realities of the various religions are not only related to the world of the mortals via priestly dialogues across the divide. This is merely the resulting view of dualistic cosmology, creating a line separating the two realms, which for the sake of religion must then somehow be bridged. In addition in several cultures the sacred is defined as being directly present inside the secular world of empirical reality. This is believed to happen when deities or other immortals decide to descend into the world of everyday life to live, as it were, side by side with the normal mortal people. Such intruders from the beyond could be deities, ghosts, deceased ancestors, or others.

The distinction between a mortal priest, who communicates with the beyond, and a deity who lives in this world like a human brings us back to the different views on Jesus in Islam and Christianity. To the Muslim, Jesus is a messenger similar to Moses, who as prophet communicates with God. To the Christian, on the other hand, Jesus is God, or at least that is what most Christian theologians teach. The German Joseph Ratzinger, who now lives in Rome where he was the pope from 2005 till 2013, published a book on Jesus. (Ratzinger 2007) In it he reminds his readers of the stories in the bible, where events are reported that point to the divine quality of the person Jesus. The well known miracle of the big catch of fish leads to the behavior of Peter, where he, stunned by the sudden presence of an abundance of fish, falls to his knees and addresses Jesus with the words: "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a man full of sin!" (Ratzinger 2007. page 347) Ratzinger believes this scene shows that Peter was convinced to have encountered not merely a priestly messenger but rather God himself and writes the comment: "This direct encounter with the living God shakes him (Peter) deeply." (ibid., 348).

Ratzinger continues by quoting several parallel reports from the bible that point in the same direction, and then summarizes his view: "In Jesus the presence of the living God became noticeable to the disciples time and again" (ibid., 349).

They thus realized that Jesus did not fit into one of the familiar categories, and that he was more and something else than *one of the prophets*" (ibid., 351). In those very special moments the disciples were severely shaken when they noticed: This is God himself" (ibid., 351). The content of faith referred to above, which - wherever it is accepted by the collective of believing Christians - makes Jesus not merely in a messenger or pontifex to connect to the sacred, but instead defines him as himself being the sacred, can be found in the writings by pope Ratzinger as well as in texts by the theologian Otto Hermann Pesch, and in articles and books by a number of other Christian scholars. It would be a rewarding project to conduct empirical research on the question, to which extend this faith in Jesus being the God who created the world as widely accepted among Christians.

The Christian child, who was quoted in the first line of this article asking if Jesus was a mythical figure or really existed in history, when informed about the different teachings on Jesus' death in Islam and Christianity spontaneously sided with the Muslim version because it spared Jesus the horrible cruelties preceding and including the crucifixion. In light of the apparent weakness of Christianity in contemporary Europe and of the massive migration of Muslims into countries that have traditionally been Christian, the question must be asked by sociologists of religion, how the two religions will confront each other in the future. One striking contribution to pursuing this question is the limited awareness of religious history in Europe. Still, most Roman Catholic Europeans are likely aware of the famous shrine at Santiago de Compostela in Spain, but few have knowledge about the fact, that the famous goal of pious pilgrimages had been occupied by Muslims in the year 997.

A useful source on the powerful presence of Islam in Europe around the turn from the first to the second millennium in Christian time is a recent article by M.T.M. Shatanawi (Shatanawi 2017). It reports, in part, about the military success of Abi Amir AlMansur, also known by the name Mohammed Bin AbiAmer, who lived from about 938 to 1002. There are numerous famous Muslim men by the name Al Mansour, because that is Arabic for The Victorious One, or, more precise, the one who achieves victory with the help of God. From 978, when he must have been about forty years of age, until 1002 was, not by title but in fact as *alManşūr billāh* the ruler of Cordoba in Spain and that caliphate's regent. In Germany he is if at all known by the name Almansor. When the caliph alHakam II died in 976 his son was still a child and his mother, the caliph's widow, too weak politically to secure a transfer of power from father to son. In the ensuing court intrigues the eunuchs tried twice to replace the child ruler with grown up princes from other families, but in both cases AlMansour succeeded in suppressing the eunuchs' machinations. While formally and on the surface he thus defended the position of the child caliph, in reality he made himself the most powerful man of the caliphate and ruled there at will from 978 on. While excluded from exercising power, the adolescent caliph Hischam II continued to be at the court leading an inconspicuous life as a quiet scholar.

Against this dynastic background *Abu Amir Muhammad ibn Abdallah ibn Abi Amir*, the full name of AlMansour, dissolved the guard of slaves loyal to the Umayyads and replaced them with mercenaries from Morocco. This military reform was to become crucial for his successes in the battle field, and it also triggered the second wave of immigration a first one occurred in the 8<sup>th</sup> century of Berbers from Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria or Libya to Andalusia. In the year 985 AlMansour defeated Barcelona, had the majority of its inhabitants killed and destroyed the city. Loaded with booties and followed by captives he returned to Cordoba in triumph. His purpose in doing this was to weaken the Power of Christian rulers in Spain. He was very successful in achieving that until the Christians of Navarra attacked the North of Anadalusia only to also be defeated by AlMansour, who then chased them to their capital Pamplona (Shatanawi 2017, page 242).

After an uninterrupted chain of victories (thereby also justifying his name) AlMansour conducted his fortyeighth invasion directed at the pilgrimage site in Santiago de Campostela with the expectation that it "will break the hearts of Christians, and destroy their morals" (Shatanawi 2017, page 244). Shatanawi explains to his readers that AlMansour here defeats in Santiago "the City of Yacoub (Jacob)" (ibid), and adds the religious instruction: "But Yacoub, after whom the city and the church were called, he is one of the twelve apostles, and to them the Holy Qura'n indicated in the AlMighty's saying: Ye who believe! Be Allah's helpers. Even as Jesus, Son of Mary, said unto the disciples: Who are my helpers for Allah? They said: we are Allah's helpers" (ibid.).

Shatanawi goes into more religious detail about the meaning of the military campaign of AlMansour against Santiago. Shatanawi points out how "Ibn A'thari mentions that in the city" there is the grave of 'Yacoub AlHawari, "one of the twelve Hawariyeen (God bless their souls) and was the most specialized with Jesus Christ (Peace be upon him) (he is the most intimate to him) they call him 'his brother,' because he is committed to him... And Yacoub with their language is Jacob, and was Bishop of Jerusalem' " (ibid.).

The Moslem view on the meaning of Santiago continues with the words: “AlHimiari mentions that this ‘church’ is built on the body of Yacoub AlHawari, they mention that he had been killed in Jerusalem, his companies entered him in a boat, it sailed with him in the Shami sea until it got out with him of the sea ocean and the passage terminated at the place of the church in a coast of it, there the church was built on him and was called after him”(61). The grave was discovered in 198 H./814 A.D. in the reign of King of the Christian Kingdom, AlFonso, the Second, nicknamed “AlA’feef” the Virtuous (174227 H./791842 A.D)” (ibid.)

Reading Shatanawi’s explanation of the religious significance of the shrine of Santiago makes the sociologist of religion wonder if his text is dealing with a sacred place for Muslims or one for Christians, or one for them both. Thus, while questions referring to the events surrounding the death of Jesus clearly lead to a separation between the two religions, there are other contents of religious significance which suggest considerable communality.

### ***Literature quoted***

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