

## Ten things Jesus might say to a radical Islamist

For the last hundred years, liberal theologians have done their best to downplay the differences between Christianity and Islam. Perhaps the most influential of these voices was that of John Hick, for whom all religions should be regarded as a non-competitive quest for the same shared 'spirituality'.

Ever since the momentous attack upon the Twin Towers in New York on the 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001, however, this eirenic perspective has been more difficult to defend. To sustain it, Western liberals, both politicians and churchmen, have insisted that Muslim militants do not represent true Islam. Groups like Al Qaeda, ISIS, and the Taliban may capture the headlines, but we are assured their views are heretical.

Unfortunately, as nice as it would be to believe this, it is a reckless distortion. Islamism is by no means as heterodox as well-meaning Western liberals suggest. Notwithstanding the wise criticism of moderate imams and reformist organisations, the Islamists' claim that they represent their faith in its most pristine form is defensible, and the level of support they enjoy among rank-and-file Muslims worldwide is disturbingly high as a result. Even more problematic, the purported convergence between Christianity and Islam is a myth that fails to do justice to the distinctive features of both faiths

Twenty years on from the 9/11 atrocity, radical Islamism continues to pose a serious threat. The victory of the Taliban in Afghanistan has undoubtedly strengthened its credibility in the eyes of many young Muslims. We all hope that the recent death of the MP, Sir David Amess, at the hands of a radicalised Somali is not the harbinger of a new wave of terrorism in the UK. But clearly, the government's Prevent scheme is neither identifying dangerous individuals nor reliably re-educating them. Can anything more be done?

The purpose of this article is primarily to expose the bankruptcy of well-intentioned attempts by Western liberals to paper over the differences between Islam and Christianity. These two faiths are inherently disjunctive, and nothing is to be gained by pretending otherwise. Our response to radical Islamism needs to recognise this.

### 1. On religion and politics

**"Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." (Mark 12:17)**

Islam is a religion of law, and a full expression of its teachings therefore requires socio-political expression. It can never be satisfied with a privatised individual response. It acknowledges no separation of sacred and secular. Muhammad himself was a political activist who, a little before his death, raised an army to seize control of Mecca and subdue the military threat posed by neighbouring pagan tribes. He thus ended his life as the unchallenged political leader of a united Muslim state.

Jesus grew up in Galilee, an area notorious for political resistance to Roman imperial rule. At least one of his disciples was previously a zealot. Jesus, however, made it clear that he had no such political ambitions. His opponents in the Jewish establishment did their best to trap him into making statements that could be cited as evidence of anti-Roman sedition, but he refused to take their bait. The gospels make very clear that his execution by the Roman authorities was based on trumped up charges. As he stated at his trial: 'My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight.'

It is true that the Christian church subsequently became a major political player, but this began three centuries after Jesus' death with the conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine. There is no evidence that Jesus anticipated or sought such an outcome. He and all his early followers emphasised their support for all civil authorities, even when these were pagan in ideology.

## 2. On violence

**"Put your sword back in its place, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword."  
(Matthew 26:52)**

The word 'peace' is immensely important to Muslims; indeed, it is their standard word of greeting. However, Muhammad was very far from a pacifist. Numerous weapons, including some famous swords, are among the venerated relics of his life preserved in the Topkapi Palace in Turkey. The Qur'anic teaching on 'struggle' (jihad) has been much discussed by Islamic scholars. They are often at pains to stress that the 'greater jihad' is a personal struggle against inner evil. Nevertheless, it is clear that jihad can also include 'holy war', and Muhammad himself undoubtedly engaged in such violent conflicts.

In many respects, the 'just war' tradition within Christian thought parallels the discussion of the ethics of warfare that is found in Muslim scholarship. However, for Christianity this began with Augustine around 400AD. Apart from the occasion when Jesus drove traders out of the Temple precincts with a home-made whip, no concession to the use of violence can be found in the New Testament. On the contrary, Jesus explicitly forbade his disciples from using the sword. Throughout church history, his extraordinary instruction in the Sermon on the Mount to 'turn the other cheek' to an aggressor and to 'love your enemies' has provided a cogent basis for Christian pacifists who insist that violence is never justified, whatever the provocation. The medieval crusades may have had the support of the Pope, but one looks in vain for any divine mandate for such military expeditions in the New Testament.

## 3. On tradition

**"You nullify the word of God by your tradition." (Mark 7:13)**

Muhammad compiled the Qur'an from oracles which he claimed represented the *ipsissima verba* of God. Very soon after his death, however, a division occurred that centred on how these divine words were to be authoritatively interpreted. The majority Sunni branch of Islam base their scholarship on what are held to be reliable memories of Muhammad's words and

actions by those who knew him closely. These were collected gradually over a considerable period of time and are known as the Hadith. The minority Shia branch, on the other hand, believe that Muhammad appointed his relative Ali as his spiritual and political successor (imam). It has developed its own Hadith reflecting this conviction. Both Sunni and Shia rely heavily on their respective traditions for their theology, their religious practice and their socio-political organisation.

It must be admitted that tradition plays a major role in Christianity too. The Roman Catholic church, in particular, bases a great many of its practices and beliefs on traditions handed down from the early church fathers and the succession of popes. However, when we examine the teaching of Jesus himself, we find that he viewed tradition with considerable caution. The Jewish scholars of his day used the oral commentary on the Old Testament law which had been passed down by eminent rabbis to settle interpretive questions. This Talmud possessed a very similar authority within Judaism to that of the Hadith in Islam. But Jesus regularly dismissed such tradition as a misleading distortion of the true intention of God's Word. While consistently asserting the divine authority of what 'is written' (Scripture), in his famous Sermon on the Mount he repeatedly contrasts what had been 'said' (oral tradition) with his own teaching ('but I say to you').

The Protestant Reformers followed Jesus in this respect, challenging centuries-old Catholic traditions in the name of a radical return to the original teaching of the Bible. Any faith based on an ancient text is vulnerable to becoming inured in tradition that prevents adaptation to a changing world. Jesus' scepticism toward the Jewish traditions of his day provides Christians with the incentive in every generation to engage in fresh thinking on the meaning of the Bible. As the pastor of the Pilgrim Fathers famously put it: 'The Lord has yet more light and truth to break forth from his Word'. Islamism remains stuck in its medieval mindset largely because it lacks such a reforming incentive.

#### 4. On prayer

**"Ask and it will be given to you." (Luke 11:9)**

Prayer is an obligatory component of Islamic piety. The good Muslim is required to pray five times a day and to participate in congregational prayer every Friday. The words of these prayers are very precisely defined, as is the posture to be adopted as they are recited. The general tone is one of reverent worship of the immense majesty of Allah and abject submission to his sovereign will. There is little opportunity for petitionary or intercessory prayer and no encouragement at all to converse with God on familiar terms.

Jesus spent long periods in prayer himself and, in response to their request, taught his disciples how to do it. His example and instruction in this matter were revolutionary and are in stark contrast to the Islamic model. He told his disciples to address God as 'Abba', the most familiar term a child could use when speaking to its father. So astonishing was this that the Aramaic

word was preserved in the Greek New Testament. He repeatedly stresses the willingness of God to hear and respond to such intimate child-like communication.

Perhaps most remarkable of all was Jesus' own passionate struggle in Gethsemane to accept his Father's will. There is very little acknowledgement of the problem of suffering within Islam, nor any clear assurance that wrestling with God in prayer about it can have any practical effect on events. Jesus, however, clearly believed that a praying human being should not think of themselves as a passive instrument in the hands of an irresistible divine omnipotence, but as an active participant in changing the world, and never more so than when their plea to be spared suffering is declined.

## 5. On the world to come

**“Keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.” (Matthew 24: 42)**

There are many references in the Qur'an to the final Day of Judgement. The Hadith intensify this expectation by describing a variety of cosmic and political signs that will mark the proximity of the coming End. Some of these are clearly influenced by the Bible. For instance, in the midst of global tribulation, it is said that an Antichrist figure ('Dajjal') will emerge and eventually be vanquished by the return of Jesus from heaven and/or the appearance of the 'Mahdi' (often depicted as a descendant of Muhammad). The Paradise ('Jannah') that awaits good Muslims is an idyllic garden furnished with abundant delights, including the 'houris' (beautiful female companions).

Eschatology plays a major role in Christian thought too. Throughout church history, innumerable millennialist sects have arisen that viewed the troubled times in which they lived through the apocalyptic prism of the book of Revelation. To an extent it must be admitted that Jesus shared their sense of imminent crisis. However, a careful reading of the gospels reveals some distinct differences in his teaching about the End from that frequently popularised by both Christians and Islamists.

For a start, the so-called signs of the End which Jesus identifies are given, not to encourage speculation among his disciples, but rather to warn them against hysterical anxiety. Cosmic and political upheavals of many kinds will indeed occur, but you are not to be alarmed, he said, for the End is 'not yet'. He insisted that the date of the End was a secret known only to his Father; when it did arrive, it would be a sudden and shattering denouement that absolutely no one was expecting. The appropriate attitude, therefore, was one of permanent readiness, as those who 'do not know the day or the hour'.

Jesus says very little about the nature of the world to come. He speaks of 'rewards' and the need to 'lay up treasure in heaven'. He comforts the dying thief with an assurance of 'Paradise'. But what exactly this word means is never made clear. He does, however, provide one rather startling insight; he says there will be no marriage in heaven. Rather, in the resurrected state men and women will be 'like the angels', by which he presumably implies there will be no

sexual intercourse. This is a very different picture from the sensuality of the 'houris' that one suspects many a young Islamist suicide-bomber anticipates as the reward of his 'martyrdom'.

## **6. On the necessity of the new birth**

**"No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." (John 3:3)**

The Holy Spirit ('ruh') is only mentioned four times in the Qur'an and always as a mode of divine communication. This function is elsewhere often attributed to the archangel Gabriel, whom many Muslims identify with the Holy Spirit. The nearest Islam comes to the Christian doctrine of spiritual regeneration is the Sufi concept of awakening; this is a psychic state attained through disciplined meditation very similar to that practised within some branches of Hindu and Buddhist mysticism. What marks out the good Muslim and earns approval on the Day of Judgement is primarily obedience to the rules laid down in the Qur'an.

Jesus, however, made clear that a very radical transformation of human nature is needed for entry into the kingdom of God. Goodness derives from the heart, so true repentance requires a deep work of divine grace. Many of his debates with the Pharisees centred on the inadequacy and frequent hypocrisy of their ideas of righteousness. He would surely voice similar criticisms of much Islamic legalism. Coercing outward conformity to pious rituals and codes of conduct can never produce a society characterised by love of God and neighbour. As the apostle Paul argues, such qualities are 'the fruit of the Spirit'.

## **7. On the experience of grace**

**"Son, your sins are forgiven." (Mark 2:5)**

The Qur'an says much about the availability of divine mercy. There is no concept of original sin; all humans beings have the ability to please God by the way they live if they so choose. If they fail, then divine forgiveness is available. The only requirement is repentance ('tawbah'), which is the act of abandoning actions which God prohibits and returning to what he has commanded.

It must be admitted that the forgiveness of sins is a less complicated business in Islam than in much of the Christian church. Roman Catholicism teaches that God has invested priests with the authority to grant absolution through the sacrament of Confession and the performance of Penance. Thus, for many Christians, finding peace of conscience involves church attendance and rituals. This ecclesiastical flummery finds little support in the New Testament. For Jesus, as in Islam, forgiveness is a matter directly between God and the individual involving no priestly or institutional intermediary.

There are some major differences, however. On a number of occasions, Jesus himself declared that the sins of an enquirer were forgiven, something which his opponents were quick to point out was the prerogative of God alone. Muhammad would certainly have agreed with them on that point. Jesus also made the willingness to forgive the sins of others an indispensable condition of receiving God's forgiveness for one's own sins. While this thought can be found in the Qur'an and the Hadith, there is much less emphasis on it. Most distinctive of all, however, is the atoning significance which Jesus attributed to his death. The central purpose of his mission, he said, was 'to give his life a ransom for many'. As the blood of the Passover Lamb turned aside

the avenging wrath of God, so his blood was shed for the forgiveness of sins, an event so important he made the act of remembering it a permanent feature of his disciples' lives. There is absolutely no correlate to this in Islamic thought. In fact, the Qur'an claims that Jesus never truly died. Rather, he was bodily translated to heaven, from whence he will return at the end of the world.

#### **8. On the cost of discipleship**

**"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." (Mark 8:34)**

The willingness of Islamists to suffer for their faith has become all too obvious in recent years. No matter how misguided we judge them to be, the self-sacrificial zeal of many of these radicalised Muslim men and women demands admiration. Young modern secularised Westerners may wave banners at their protest meetings demanding action on climate-change or the removal of an offending statue, but there is little evidence of a similar willingness to die for their cause. Western culture is losing the contest with Islam for hearts and minds in many parts of the world today largely because of its pusillanimous lack of moral courage.

Jesus was very frank about the cost of discipleship, anticipating that his own fate would find its echo in the lives of many of his followers. Once again, however, there is a vital difference. Jesus' death was nothing like that of a suicide-bomber, a hunger-striker or a kamikaze pilot. Though it can be truly said that he laid down his life, it was taken by the violence of others. The same is true of all Christian martyrs. Their death is not a military stratagem or a manipulative gesture. They die at the hands of cruel persecutors as an act of loyal witness to their Master.

#### **9. On his own identity**

**"This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!" (Mark 9:7)**

Islam is emphatic about its unqualified monotheism. It totally rejects the Christian doctrine of the Trinity on three grounds: first, because several sections of the Qur'an explicitly deny it; second, because it is irrational, implying that 1 can be equal to 3; and third, on the grounds that Jesus himself never claimed to be incarnate deity, but was just a prophet.

The first two of these objections are not difficult to counter. The Qur'anic passages seem to engage with a garbled and unsophisticated version of trinitarianism that substitutes Mary, the mother of Jesus, for the Holy Spirit. Perhaps this is why much Islamic scholarship fails to do justice to the erudition that informed the formulation of the Nicene creed and the huge weight of theological reflection that has supported it over nearly two millennia. That the Trinity is a profound mystery known only by revelation Christians readily concede; but it should not surprise us that this mystery transcends the rules of conventional logic, given that it describes the eternal nature of God.

The argument that Jesus never claimed divinity is by far the strongest of the three, not least because it has been endorsed by some who identify as Christians, including Arians (4<sup>th</sup> century),

Unitarians (16<sup>th</sup> century), Christadelphians and Jehovah's Witnesses (19<sup>th</sup> century) and any number of sceptical theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, of whom perhaps Robert Funk, the founder of the Jesus Seminar (1985), is one of the most influential.

However, if the account of Jesus' life and teaching provided by the gospels is regarded as trustworthy, then it must be accepted that Jesus claimed divine prerogatives. As we have already noted, he forgave people's sins. Indeed, he said he would have the authority on the Last Day to admit to Heaven or to send to Hell. On the Mount of Transfiguration, the voice of God was heard to affirm his unique divine sonship, clearly ranking him above the prophets Moses and Elijah with whom he appeared. When the disciple Peter, in a sudden flash of recognition, confessed him as 'the Christ, the Son of the living God', he accepted the title without reservation and attributed Peter's insight to divine revelation. This egocentricity that pervades so much of his teaching is all the more astonishing when it is placed alongside statements like 'I am meek and lowly in heart', with no one apparently sensing any contradiction.

If Jesus had seen himself as a prophet, then he surely would have made sure that his words were written down. But he consistently denied that he felt any need to complement the verbal revelation already given in the Old Testament. His messianic mission was quite different: 'to seek and to save the lost', and ultimately, like a good shepherd, to 'lay down his life for his sheep'. Supremely, of course, it was his resurrection from the dead that clarified the minds of his disciples on the issue of his identity, silencing the doubts even of Thomas and evoking the confession 'My Lord and my God'.

It is true that the doctrine of the Trinity was historically expressed in language drawn from Greek philosophy rather than the Bible. However, it has proven very hard to find any superior vocabulary by which to do justice to the New Testament's testimony to the uniqueness of Jesus. Sceptics often argue that a divine identity was foisted onto Jesus by the apostle Paul under the influence of Greek mythology. But it is unthinkable that this former Pharisee would compromise his monotheism in that way. Like the rest of the apostles, Paul's lofty Christology stemmed initially from his dramatic encounter with the risen Christ, whom he quite instinctively addressed as 'Lord'. But it seems to have deepened further as he reflected on the implications of Jesus' atoning death. To suggest that God would place the guilt of the sins of the world on an innocent third-party would be a travesty of divine justice. The atonement only made sense if in some very real sense God was '*in Christ* reconciling the world to himself'.

It is perhaps worth noting one promising line of apologetic that might help a Muslim enquirer to engage more sympathetically with what Christians mean when they speak of the deity of Christ. Because it is the last and most perfect expression of the will of God for human beings, many Muslims believe that the Qur'an is an earthly transcription of an eternal heavenly book. Such a thought is tantalisingly close to what the apostle John means when he calls Jesus 'the Word' ('logos'). The difference of course is that, in Christian experience, no book, no matter how inspired, can fully mirror the 'image of God'. Only a perfect human personality could do this: 'the Word made flesh'.

## 10. On global mission

**'Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.'** (Mark 16:15)

Muslims and Christians share a sense of global mission. Divine judgement is imminent for each of us, and it is therefore every believer's duty to seek to turn a complacent world from its idols in preparation for that awesome final assize.

Radical Islamism is proving successful on the world stage by eschewing Arab nationalism and returning to the dream of global conversion that fired Islam's early success. The remarkable growth of the 'Umma al-Islam' (the community of Islamic people) following the 'Hijrah' (Muhammad's flight to Medina in 622) and during the caliphates based in Damascus and later in Baghdad were largely the result of **military conquest** by Arab armies. Radical Islamists are simply trying to persuade the world to embrace the faith of the Qur'an by recapitulating the proven effectiveness of that early expansionist praxis.

As encouraging as it is for Western liberals to hear moderate Muslims challenging the Islamists' theocratic ambitions and violent methods, the sad truth is that neither the Qur'an nor history is on their side. Could it be then that Christians, rather than looking for non-existent common ground with Islam, would do better by looking, as the Islamists themselves do, back to their roots, namely the missionary methodology of Jesus and the apostles?

Jesus, as we have already noted, was not a military leader; he was an itinerant **preacher and teacher**. The remarkable proliferation of Christian churches throughout the Mediterranean Basin and Asia Minor during the first two centuries after his crucifixion was the result of the **gospel preaching** of unarmed and frequently solitary missionaries who travelled the known world in obedience to his final commission. Such brave evangelism remains the only authentically Christian way to seek the world's conversion. As we have noted, Jesus insisted that violence is ultimately self-defeating; those who live by the sword will die by it. If he is right, then radical Islamism contains the seeds of its own destruction. Those who espouse it will eventually be disillusioned. At that point, perhaps Christians who have learned from their Master to love their enemies may find that their preachers have a new audience.