

The Islamic Thought of Self and Other in Imam Riza's Controversy with the Judaic, Christian, and Zoroastrian Scholars

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Theological controversies with querying opponents had never been rarefied or disapproved in Islam whose preaching of open-mindedness and acceptance of the non-Muslim Other remains a distinctive attribute throughout its history. From the very advent of the Islamic Prophet, he started arguing with the religious scholars of opposing sects, mainly Jews and Christians, and some of these controversies are documented in the Holy Quran.

So, whoever argues with you concerning him, even after (such) knowledge as has come to you, then, say: "Come! We should call our sons and your sons, and our women and your women, and ourselves and yourselves; thereafter we should imprecate, (and) so lay the curse of Allah on the liars."

(3:61)

In the early decades after the ascendancy of Islam and after the death of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) himself, it was quite common that Muslims were in direct connection, sometimes coalition, with other mainstream religious sects (Black,47). However, the obstinate neighboring Jews, Christians, and Parsees developed general enmity against Islam that they either claimed to be Muslims cunningly in order to destroy Islam from inside, or they propagated negative views of Islam to pass prescribed anti-Islamic judgments to the non-Muslim world. In his *Defense du Coran Contre ses Critiques* (1988) and *Defense de la vie du Prophet Muhammad Contre ses Detracteurs* (1990), Abdul-Rahman Badawi (1917-2002) replied to the biased claims of classical non-Muslim authors, proving objectively that in their most influential books they neglected, whether intentionally or not, to consult authentic historical sources and Islamic manuscripts well known and bestowed for them.

In one of these manuscripts, a discussion between Imam Riza and other religious scholars is documented to unmask some out of season Islamic thoughts of Self and Other. The author of the Ms. says: "One of the days Mamoon decides to invite the scholars from different sects of the world and he brought Imam Riza (A.S.) to the assembly". His intention was that he "might be able to get the Imam (A.S.) invalidated and uncredencial ..., thus finish his influence". Mamoon synchronized the world religious celebrities of the time to aggregate and compete with the spiritual leader (Imam Riza) of the twelve Imams Shiates and he

thought that he could himself master the assembly. However, his attitude could not remain neutral in the competition which he created because when Imam Riza arrived to the assembly, he seated himself beside Mamoon, the Muslim political leader. Mamoon, who witnessed the Golden days of the Abbasside Age, did not consider the devastating results of his intention if the non-Muslim contractors were to defeat Imam Riza in this debate. It could probably end with the Fall of the Islamic Nation. Thus, Imam Riza emphasized indirectly the importance of Islamic oneness and he did not give the impression that Muslims were out of joint. Undoubtedly, he aimed at achieving a universal Islamic victory rather than limited personal glory. The Imam's wide scope of thinking proves that the competent spiritual leaders are more inspiring to revitalize the nation than vain political leaders.

The selected scholars who were invited to the assembled debate were representatives of the most prominent religions in the time: Jasaleeq, the great Christian scholar; Raasul Jalout, the Judaic scholar; and Imran, the chief Zoroastrian priest. Hassan Naufali, Imam Riza's biographer quotes the Imam saying: " I talk to the Christians from their own Book and talk to the Jews from Torah and with fire worshippers in Persian tongue". This excerpt exposes various methodologies that Imam Riza uses in his discussion with the scholars to prove his points of view. In general, he provides Jasaleeq with a textual evidence from the New Testament, the Christian part of the Bible, and a scientific-historical evidence to Raasul Jalout, foreshadowing the German philological studies which produced critical exegesis of the Scriptures in 19th-century Europe. Finally, the Imam led a philosophical debate with the Zoroastrian chief, Imran regarding God and the myth of creation ended with Imran's apostasy and embracing Islam, which is the greatest triumph in this assembly.

In the first part of the debate, Jasaleeq asked the Imam: "What is your [the Islamic] opinion of Jesus Christ?" The Imam replied: "We believe he was the Prophet of God." So Islam testifies the truth of Jesus' prophet-hood, regarding this issue as one of its main principles. In Surat Maryam (Mary), Jesus says in the cradle: "Surely I am the bondman of Allah. He has brought me the Book and made me a Prophet" (19:30). Thereby, both Christians and Muslims adopt the same opinion regarding the prophet-hood of Jesus Christ, though they disagree on regarding him the "Son of God". Thus, in the same Sura, the Quran says: "In no way is it for Allah to take to him a child" (19:35).

Jasaleeq asked another question to the Imam turning the focus of their debate another way: "What proof do you have about your own Prophet's Prophet-hood"? Instead of

defending the authenticity of his Prophet, which Islam maintains, Jasaleeq started questioning the trustworthiness of the Prophet of Islam. In order to answer this question, Imam Riza referred Jasaleeq not to the Quran, but to the Gospel of John, one of the four canonical Gospels of the New Testament. The Christians are well-acquainted with this way of documentation, which was first acknowledged by Jesus Christ himself who referred in his debates with the Jews to excerpts from the Old Testament in order to consolidate his opinions, supporting them by sayings from other undisputed Prophets, and his disciples had done the same way in their discussions with the debaters.

The Imam recited the third chapter of St. John's Gospel up to the place where Jesus says: "I will proceed towards God and Barklita will come towards you and he will break and dismantle infidels" (Ms.). In the contemporary versions of the Bible, the word "Barklita" is not available, instead of it a Biblical persona called the "Son of Man" is exposed who seems to be totally different from the "Son of God", or "God's only Son". Definitely, the "Son of Man" is not Jesus Christ because if Jesus talks about himself, he should use the first person singular, not the third person, as in his saying: "as Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the desert, in the same way the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life" (Jn 3:14-5). Moreover, if Jesus is the "Son of Man" whose advent would save humanity in general, then it is a direct denial to the Virgin birth of Jesus, an essential religious creed that both Christians and Muslims agree upon. Thus, it is a prophecy of the advent of another Prophet after Jesus: "The one whom God has sent speaks God's words, because God gives him the fullness of his spirit" (Jn 3:34). There is another evidence that what Jesus states is only a prophecy when he challenges the Jews, in his saying: "You do not believe me when I tell you about the things of this world; how will you ever believe me, then, when I tell you about the things of Heaven" (Jn 3:30), or the future decrees of heaven.

The overt discrepancy in the Bible is due to two facts. First, there are some canonical and other non-canonical Gospels, showing a variety of tales. Later on, these tales were explicated by St. Paul, a man who had not known Jesus personally though created a Myth out of him (Gohnson,147). Paul claimed that Jesus is not only the "Son of God", but an incarnation of God himself, or God's logos on earth. On this claim, the Catholic Church built its foundation stone, regarding not only Jesus, but even the Popes as representatives of God on earth. In 1945, some genuine scrolls were discovered in Nag Hammadi / Egypt and in 1947

other scrolls were discovered in the forsaken caves of the Dead Sea. Unlike the counterfeited Gospels of the Bible, these scrolls, which were written by authors contemporaneous to Jesus, prove some points that only Islam presents about Jesus, such as the Islamic assertion that he did not die on the cross (Baigent, 18).

In fact, the third chapter of John's Gospel presents a discussion between Jesus Christ and the Pharisee Rabbi, Nicodemus. In their notes, the authors of *Mystical Reading of John's Gospel* (2004, 219), say that Nicodemus is an outstanding scholar, a noble and rich man who belonged to the Jewish Sanhedrin, the sophisticated seventy leaders of Judea. What attracts the attention is that this man came to Jesus at night, telling him: "We know that you are a teacher sent by God. No one could perform the miracles you are doing unless God were with him". If he opened his dialogue with a testimony of Jesus, then what did he come to ask for? The use of the pronoun "we" is very significant; it means that the Jewish leaders in general testified the Prophet-hood of Jesus, though at night, but it is quite clear that their spokesman, Nicodemus himself, sought knowledge of another man. The dialogue proceeds talking about the Kingdom of God and the Son of Man. Jesus did not say that he will come as the Prophet of the later time as he did not refer to the Christian dictum of salvation - Jesus, the Lamb of God who would save humanity with his blood. Rather, he says: "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not have life, but will remain under God's punishment" (Jn 3:36). Jesus does not say that he will be the Savior of humanity in general, but the "Son of Man" will.

In the middle of this discussion between Jesus and the Rabbi, some reference breaks through alluding to John, the Baptist before he had been put in prison. John's disciples asked him about Jesus who was baptizing "on the east side of the Jordan", and people went to him leaving John. This digression, which is inserted between two coherent parts talking about the Kingdom of God and the "Son of Man" who will come later on, is undoubtedly meant to make John, not Jesus, say: "I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him" (Jn 3:28). The prophecy, which the Bible's author wanted it to be from John, the Baptist to Jesus Christ, is only from Jesus himself to someone else who will come after him. Thus, when Imam Riza pointed out this point in the assembly, Jasaleeq "became silent and did not utter a word", says the Ms. This same point is obviously expressed in some of the non-canonical Bibles, like the Didactic Gospel (16:8), which was recently discovered in Jerusalem and the

Gospel of Barnaba (42:5-17), in which Jesus refers directly to the Messiah who will come after him.

In the second part of the debate, the Imam asks Raasul Jalout, the chief scholar of Judaism: "What is your proof and argument that you have about the Prophet-hood of Moses (A.S.)?" Raasul Jalout answers: "Moses (A.S.) had miracles such as turning the club into a serpent, splitting the river Nile and passing through it and a light shown from his hand". Hearing this, the Imam replied, asking, if you believe in your Prophet's miracles, then "why did you not believe in the Prophet-hood of Essa the Christ" who did also bring miracles with him, like making the dead alive and curing diseases? Raasul Jalout says: "We have not seen these to have faith and belief in it". The Imam asked, using Raasul Jalout's own indication: "Then why do you believe in the Prophets before him? Similarly in Moses himself, have you seen the miracles of Moses?" The Judaic scholar seemed to be quite certain in his answer to the Imam's question, saying: "The way it has been narrated to us he has said, such things which others have not and brought such things which have no previous record".

Raasul Jalout referred to the Old Testament, which is the only part of the Bible acknowledged by the Jews, or what is known as Torah, a term connected more with the first five books of the Old Testament. Those books are supposed to be written by Moses himself though they contain certain information about Moses' own death and narrate events even after his death. The Imam asked Raasul Jalout: "From which source did you come to know that he brought these words", i.e. what is your proof of the credentiality and authenticity of the Old Testament since it was authored by various pens. He replied: "Through history and those who heard those words from him". Thus, the Imam rebuked and scolded him by saying: "Others too seek refuge in history so how do you want to invite them to your creed?" Raasul Jalout, says the Ms., "kept calm and quiet and did not utter a word".

This critical approach to the ancient texts was not followed in the West until the 19th-century studies of J.G. Eichhorn (1753-1827), the German founder of modern Old Testament criticism. According to Eichhorn, "not all the Old Testament books came to us as one piece from the hand of their authors. Sometimes the authors themselves, later disciples or collectors put fragmented parts together". Thus, the Old Testament had passed through several hands until after the Babylonian Exile when the Old Testament was first written down. Denying its Divine authorship, the Bible is secularized, it is "no longer a Sacred Scripture, but a book among other books" (Weidner, 169). "We must read the Bible", says the German writer L.G.

Herder, "in a human way, since it is a book written by man for man". Thus, modern Biblical critics found out some hints in the Old Testament to prior religious, mythical and literary writings that were highly influential and inspiring to the authors of the Bible who had imitated the pagan liturgical hymns, the Myth of Gilgamish, and the legislations of Hamorabi. Hana Hana, for instance, concentrates on the Old Testament's presentation of God as a mythical figure, half- human and half-divine, and on the possible sources of Moses' Ten Principles. Hana's claims found support in the writings of Firas Al-Sawah to prove that the authors of the Old Testament could have come through the epic of Gilgamish or the legislations of Hamorabi, beside many other Mesopotamian and Faro writings.

In the last part of the debate, Imam Riza told Imran, the Zoroastrian priest of star-worshippers: "ask me what you wish". "Imran", says the manuscript, "questioned him regarding a few topics about God, the philosophy of creation and got his answers and embraced Islam at the hand of Imam (A.S.)." Zoroastrianism is a highly contemplative and natural religion; hence, its followers worship the sun as a manifestation of the Creator who is all good for them. Since no evil originates from God, then good and evil should have two distinctive sources. Zoroastrian theological philosophy divides existence into darkness and light; one is responsible for evil, the other for good. Thus, they worship fire as a considerate agent of purity and sincerity. The Zoroastrian priests should constantly keep it sustaining in their temples.

In the post-Muhammadan era, says the English orientalist, Edward G. Browne (13), when Persia was overthrown by the Muslims, its major religion, Zoroastrianism was theosophically synthesized with Islamic principles, producing a unique Persianate mystical spirit which distinguished the Persian Islamic social life, literature, and rituals. Thus, Imran realized, in his discussion with Imam Riza, that the two religions are very close to each other and he embraced Islam at the end.

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