

Muslim-Christian exchange

Who was Jesus?

"Who was Jesus?" was the theme of a Muslim-Christian exchange sponsored by the Maritime Muslim Students Association on March 20th in Dalhousie's Student Union Building. Gary Miller (Abdullahad Omar) of Toronto, a student of the Bible who embraced Islam six years ago, delivered the first lecture. The second was given by Dr. Jacques Goulete of Mount Saint Vincent's Department of Religion. Following the formal talks was a lengthy question-and-answer session in which the audience participated.

Gary Miller began with a summary of the presentation of Jesus in the Quran—a prophet chosen by God to deliver the same message of Islam ("submission to God") delivered by all true prophets, a man holy but not divine, who worked miracles by the authority of God.

His aim, Miller stated, was not to disprove the divinity of Jesus but to demonstrate that claims to that effect are unwarranted. Proof must rest on facts, not on an interpretation of facts or an explanation of a belief. The two medieval theories that "phlogiston" was the fire-causing substance in the combustible articles and that garbage left to lie would turn into rats illustrate that

explanation and interpretation must be distinguished from proof. Similarly, the Christian argument for the divinity of Jesus that God is holy, and man sinful, and thus a mediator is required is an explanation of Christian belief, not a proof. The divinity of Jesus is an interpretation of his post-crucifixion appearance; his divinity is not proven by his post-crucifixion appearance.

Miller then cited biblical passages often quoted by Christians as proof that Jesus both was and claimed himself to be God, offering an alternate explanation for each. When Jesus said to Philip (John 14:9), "If you have seen the Father, you have seen me," he need not have been claiming to be God. If he had meant to do so, he would surely have made it clear that he was God the Son, not God the Father, an important distinction in the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. If he meant literally "your eyes are now resting on God," how are we to reconcile his statement, "You have never seen the Father" (John 5:37), made to people who were at that moment looking at him?

In John 3:16, Jesus is said to have referred to himself as God's only begotten son. Christian translators now tell us that this is a mistranslation and should more

correctly read "one of a kind" or "unique" son. But there is also and deliberate confusion in arguing the deity of Jesus, Miller said. Manipulation of biblical texts is evidenced in the use of the word "saviour": when the Bible speaks of Jesus, modern translators have rendered the word "saviour" but when it speaks of someone else (Obadiah 21, Nehemiah 9:27) the same word is translated "deliverance." Internal evidence that the usual rendering is in error, for Hebrews 11:17 describes Isaac as the "only-begotten son" of Abraham—yet numerous other passages (Genesis 17:24, 25; 21:5; 25:8,9) show that Isaac was at no time the only-begotten son of Abraham.

The Muslim charges the Christian with manipulation, overspecification, suppression of evidence, "so as to imply that there is only one saviour, Jesus, as defined by Christian theology."

An example of overspecification is the usual interpretation of Jesus' words, "I am the way, the truth, the life; no man comes to the Father but by me." Yet "way" may mean merely a means to God; "truth", the truth of Jesus' message and mission; "life", that following his message was essential to life, none of which is disputed by the Quran.

Suppression of evidence is charged when the Christian claims that the Jews killed Jesus for blasphemy and cite John 10:33 as proof that it was his claim to be God that so angered them. Yet in the last nine verses of the chapter, rarely quoted in this context, Jesus goes back to show the Jews that he was making no such claim.

Theologians deliberately confuse the issue by citing passages such as the one in which the highpriest asks Jesus if he is the

Messiah. "Messiah" is only a transliteration of the Hebrew word meaning "anointed one." Indeed, if Messiah is another name for God, then David, Solomon and Cyrus the Persian are also God, as they are called by the same title. This difficulty is hidden by the practice of modern translators in reserving the transliteration "Messiah" for passages speaking of Jesus, and translating "anointed one" for all other passages.

To the Christian who holds that God became man, the Muslim asks, "What do you mean?" Was it kenosis? How did God become man while retaining God-hood? Certain limitations make us human and these limitations, by definition, cannot apply to God. Was Jesus mortal or immortal?

Finally, Miller dealt with common Christian responses to his arguments such as "You just don't know Jesus" to which he replies that he knows the same Jesus they do as he has read Jesus' words as recorded in the Bible. But if the Christian is describing a "feeling in the heart" rather than giving reasons for why he believes what he does, there is little basis for discussion. "You should pray for guidance" and "you need to be more humble," the Christian will often say to him. The Muslim, Miller responds, is required to pray for guidance five times daily, with his forehead to the ground, in humility before his Creator. Improper arguments hinder Christians from understanding what their own scriptures say about Jesus and, as a consequence, from the right understanding of God as presented in the Quran—unique, absolute, childless, fatherless and incomparable.

Dr. Jacques Goulete began his lecture by remarking that he wished neither to prove nor disprove anything, but to present a Christian way of understanding Jesus, based on the traditional, orthodox interpretation of Scripture as set out in the first seven ecumenical councils.

Goulete quoted John's Gospel in which Jesus tells his disciples that the world will recognize them by the love they have for one another. "He did not say by believing this or that about me," but by their love, and Goulete expressed a desire for that spirit of love to be the context of his remarks.

In Matthew 16, Jesus asks his disciples the question still being asked today, "Who do men say that I am?" Simon Peter replies, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." But what did Peter mean? "I don't know too clearly and I don't think Peter knew either," Goulete said. Certainly, the Quran says it did not mean he was God; equally certain is it that the Council of Ephesus in 325 proclaimed him to be one with God, providing the reference-point for orthodox Christian theology. "From the Christian perspective, Jesus is a

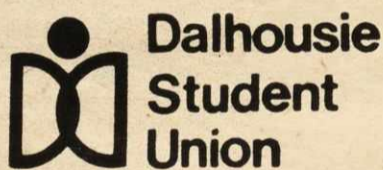
partaker of the divine nature. He is one with God who is one. And this is a paradox which I cannot explain to you, regarding the strict monotheism in Christian belief. There is one God and in that we are totally in accordance with the Quran and Muhammad the Prophet of Allah—namely, that there is only one God, Creator of heaven and earth, of Adam, Eve, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, the prophets, Jesus, Muhammad."

Yet the Christian acknowledges that for God to be God, He must be God the Parent (Father/Mother), infinitely life-giving, and God the Child (Son/Daughter), infinitely life-receiving, and God the Holy Spirit, the spirit of union, infinitely life-sharing. God has one divine nature and three divine persons within that nature. Despite this doctrine, however, Goulete reiterated that Christians are "strict monotheists, with the Jews and the Muslims, among others."

"Since we are in God's image—that is to say, God is calling us to be exactly what God is Himself—we have within us an urge to receive life fully, to give life fully and to be one with all that is good," and this Goulete calls the trinitarian dynamism by which God creates us in His own image. Thus for Goulete, there is no difficulty in accepting Jesus as both Son of Man and Son of God.

But whatever we make of this doctrine of Jesus, Goulete asserted, "It is most important that we practice caring and sharing with each other." He quoted Philippians 2 which tells us that Jesus, though divine in nature, did not covet equality with God, and lowered his dignity to take on the form of a man and die on the cross, for which reason God has raised him to the highest position and decreed that one day every knee will bow to him and every tongue confess him as Lord. The writer of these words, Goulete explained, was a devoted Jew who considered Jesus the Antichrist and persecuted his followers until the Damascus vision in which Jesus told him, "Whatever you do to these Christians, you are doing to me." "This was the turning point for Paul," Goulete said, "from which time he became one with the Christians, perhaps the greatest of them all."

In conclusion, Goulete returned to his theme of love, remarking that we believe what we believe because of the milieu of our birth and rarely do we critically examine our faith. Ultimately, we are called to live by our conscience. "God is calling us to the best within us and around us," to live by the more reasonable in the light of all that we have experienced and known and our emotion and upbringing, and the call is to greater love, greater life, greater truth. "And so we go from day to day, hopefully trying to be what God calls us to be, and then one day we shall all be one, and God will be all in all."



NOTICE

CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT

The Council of the Student Union will consider the adoption of a revised constitution for the union on Sunday, April 1st at 1 p.m. in the Council Chambers, 2nd Floor SUB. Interested students are invited to attend.

NOTICE OF GENERAL MEETING

There will be a General Meeting of the Student Union at 12:30 p.m. on Wednesday, April 11th in the Green Room, SUB. This meeting will consider any constitutional amendments approved by the Council, and any other business proposed. All students are invited to attend.

Tim Hill, President



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