

## **Book Review: Jesus in the Qur'an**

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Reviewing *A Study In Comparative Religion*, by Geoffrey Parrinder, originally published in 1979 by Sheldon Press, London, re-issued by One World Publications, 1995.

Islam is the most maligned religion of the world. It is therefore refreshing to see a scholar of Christian theology looking at the Qur'an with understanding and writing sympathetically.

In this book, Geoffrey Parrinder looks at those 93 verses of the Qur'an where Jesus Christ is mentioned and discusses the various implications. He also draws parallels between the Qur'an and the Bible. In the first three chapters, the meaning and etymology of the words 'Jesus Christ' are explained. Chapter 2 discusses the various titles the Holy Qur'an has used for Jesus Christ. In Chapter 3, the Qur'anic address 'Ibn Mariyam' is discussed and the significance of other names given to Jesus is explored. In this discussion, the author makes an interesting observation: '.....one of the commonest titles for him is Son of Mary (Ibn Maryam). This metronymic occurs twenty-three times in the Qur'an, sixteen times as Jesus, son of Mary, and seven times as son of Mary alone or with some other title. This is surprising, since 'son of Mary' occurs only once in the Bible.'

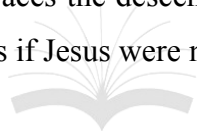
This observation implies that the Qur'an accepts the virgin birth more readily than the Bible, although the author has avoided saying that in so many words.

Chapter 4 discusses the Qur'anic term '*al-Maseeh*'. The author has gone on to explore the commentaries of Ferozabadi, Zamakhsahri and Baydhawee to understand the meaning of this term.

The fifth chapter is devoted to Zachariah and John the Baptist and the sixth to Mary. The following six are devoted to the life, works and death of Jesus as described in the Qur'an with parallels drawn from the Scriptures.

Chapter 6 is dedicated to Mary, the mother of Jesus. Chapter 7 discusses the annunciation. Now, this is a purely Biblical term. It refers to Angel Gabriel's announcement of incarnation as mentioned in Luke 1:26-38. It is quite obvious that the concept of incarnation is totally abhorrent to Islam. But, the description of the Angel visiting Mary in Sura Maryam (Ch. 19) and in Sura Aal-e-Imran (Ch. 3) in the Holy Qur'an is very similar to that in the New Testament. This is what Parrinder has tried to put forth in his text. To a Muslim reader though, the title annunciation with the connotation of incarnation of Jesus Christ is totally unacceptable. Once again, Parrinder makes an interesting comment:

'The story in Matthew is more plainly that of a virgin birth, though there is the genealogy which traces the descent of Jesus from Abraham and David through Joseph, which would seem pointless if Jesus were not Joseph's son.' (pp 72).



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Chapter 8 is about the birth of Jesus. Chapter 9 discusses the works of Jesus and Chapter 10 is about his sayings. In this last one, Parrinder devotes considerable text to discussing Jesus prophesying about the coming of the last prophet. The name mentioned in the Qur'an is 'Ahmad' (Q.61:6).

Chapter 11 discusses the death of Jesus. Parrinder argues that although Q.4:157 denies the crucifixion, the death of Jesus is confirmed by Q. 19:33.

Chapter 12 is devoted to the concept of the return of Jesus as described in Qur'an. Chapter 13 discusses the notion of 'Son of God' and Chapter 14 is about the concept of Trinity. Once again, the author makes an interesting comment:

'Sura 5/73 then goes on to say: Assuredly they have disbelieved who say: "God is one of three" (or the "third of three"). There is no God but one God'. The orthodox Christianity

must agree. God cannot be one of three. The notion of three Gods is as offensive to Christianity as to Islam. Christianity claims to be monotheistic, to believe in one God only.' (pp 134).

This is a remarkable comment made by an educated Christian who has also been teaching religious theology to University students. If Christianity is really monotheistic then where does the concept of "three in one and one in three" fit in this entire religious framework? Those who have read the Bible with some depth know that the concept of trinity which is so often propagated by the Christians, is nowhere to be found in it.

Chapter 15 is a discussion of the revealed books as mentioned in the Qur'an, particularly of the *Injil* or the Evangel. Chapter 16 discusses the mention of Christians ('*Nasara*') themselves in the Qur'an. The author mentions the occasions when the Prophet of Islam and early Muslims came in contact with Christians. It is, however, curious to note that he does not mention the most significant of them all. In the tenth year of Hijra, a deputation of Christian leaders from Najran came and had a long dialogue with the Prophet, questioning him about the Qur'an's view of Christian beliefs. After several days of discussion there was no agreement on any point. Then the Prophet invited the Christians to come and have a holy confrontation (*mubahila*). The Prophet appeared with his daughter, Fatima, son-in-law, Ali, and his two grandchildren, Hasan and Husayn. The Christians looked and said to each other that we are seeing faces who, if beckoned to the mountains, they would move, and saying this, they declined the *mubahila*. This is recorded in Qur'an 3:61. It is surprising that such an important event would be omitted from this book. The point worth noting is that the Christian leaders mentioned the moving of mountains. This was in reference to Matthews 17:14-21. A boy was possessed by the Devil. His parents brought him to the disciples. They prayed for him but nothing happened. Then the boy was brought to Jesus Christ himself, who prayed for the boy and thus he was cured of the evil influence. The disciples were surprised. Jesus explained: If your hearts had so much as mustard seed's worth of faith, the mountains would move. Thus the Christian leaders saw the same power in the faces of *Panjatan* (the five members of the Prophetic household) which the disciples had seen in the face of Jesus.

It is surprising that Parrinder will miss such a significant event in this context of the discussion.

Anyway, we found the last chapter of the book particularly interesting and of great value to all readers. We quote from it:

'The Semitic view of God may need to be cleared of some Greek theories that have overlaid it. Then if theology is to make contact with the modern world it must express itself in a meaningful way. Terms like Son of God, Trinity and Salvation need to be re-shaped and given new point. Concepts of Prophecy, inspiration and revelation must be re-examined in view of the undoubted revelation of God in Muhammad and in the Qur'an. Then much more real charity and generous understanding must be shown to members of other faith. The example of Islam towards other people of the Book often puts us to shame. Christians always need to remember the words of Jesus, 'Why call me Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say ?'

This alone is a striking statement from an educated Christian theologian. The author very clearly admits that the Christian theological thought has been corrupted by the infiltration of the Greek theories into it. Not only that, he goes on to suggest, to his fellow Christians, of course, that there is a need to cleanse the Christian thought of that pollution. In fact, he says that if Christians did improve their understanding of the various spiritual terms which are common among the revealed religions, the interfaith gap can be reduced considerably.

Parrinder has not only studied the Qur'an thoroughly, he has gone on to study the various books of *tafseer* like Baydhawee and Zamakhshari. His study of the subject does not seem to be limited to classical writers only. He has also looked at modern works like those by Indian authors Maulana Abul Kalam Azad and Sir Syed Ahmad Khan.

It is an interesting book for educated Christians as well as for Muslims and for all those interested in the study of comparative religion.

### About Geoffrey Parrinder (from his Obituary After his Death in 2005)

The distinguished scholar Geoffrey Parrinder, who has died aged 95, advocated the study of world religions at all levels of education. A teacher, writer, member of the World Congress of Faiths and the Shap working party on world religions in education, set up in 1969, he gave much encouragement to those working in schools and colleges, in Britain and abroad.

Formerly professor in the comparative study of religions at King's College London, Parrinder was a prolific writer, most importantly on African religions. It was his work on Indian religions, Islam and comparative themes that appealed to a wide reading public, however, and helped promote better understanding and closer collaboration between members of different faiths and cultures. His textbook, *What World Religions Teach Us* (1968), was a bestseller.

Parrinder was born in New Barnet, Hertfordshire, to a family of liberal and tolerant religious ethos. His father, from a practising Wesleyan Methodist family, worked for glove firms in the City of London, and eventually set up his own business. In 1919, the family moved to Leigh-on-Sea, Essex, where Geoffrey went to school until 16, when he started work as a railway booking clerk.

Through a family friend, he learned about different Christian groups and adherents of other faiths, especially Buddhism. While working for the railways, he qualified as a local preacher and then trained for the Wesleyan Methodist ministry at Richmond College, London (1929-32). In 1933, ignoring his parents' earlier attempts to dissuade him, he went out to Dahomey (now Benin), in French West Africa, after acquiring enough theology and French in Montpellier. He was to work in Africa, on and off, for 19 years.

His missionary career in Dahomey and the Ivory Coast lasted until 1946. In 1936, he had returned to England to become ordained and marry Mary, a nurse he had met at a Methodist meeting some years earlier. In 1940, after being unable to return to Dahomey from leave in England- because it was under Vichy collaborationist rule- Parrinder worked on the Methodist circuit in Redruth, Cornwall (1940-43), and the French circuit in Guernsey (1946-1949), with another spell in West Africa in between.

During this time, he took London BA and BD degrees externally and worked for an MA, MTh and PhD, based on pioneering empirical research on the indigenous religious beliefs of West Africa. His first book, *West African Religion* (1949), was followed by more research on religion in Ibadan, published as *Religion In An African City* (1953), which gained him a London University DD. Other important publications were *African Psychology* (1951), *African Traditional Religion* (1954), *Witchcraft* (1958) and *The Story Of Ketu* (1956).

In 1949, he was appointed to the highly innovative department of religious studies at University College Ibadan in Nigeria, first as lecturer (1949-50), then as senior lecturer (1950-58), teaching many African students and making lasting friendships. In 1958, he became a reader in the comparative study of religions at King's College London, where the future Archbishop Desmond Tutu was among his students. Awarded a personal chair in 1970, he was dean of the faculty of theology (1972-74) and retired in 1977.

Parrinder was a founder member of the British Association for the Study of Religions, its honorary secretary (1960-72), president (1972-77) and a life member. He was active in the London Society for the Study of Religion, where he was president (1980-82), and the London Society of Jews and Christians, where he was also president (1981-90) and honorary life president. A founder member and co-president of the Shap working party, he helped advance the study of religion as a significant subject.

He served on the editorial boards of several journals and gave many prestigious lectures around the world. He was also a visiting professor at the International Christian University, in Tokyo (1977-78), and a visiting lecturer at the University of Surrey (1978-82).

His publishing output was phenomenal, including 29 single-authored and six edited books between 1949 and 1992, as well as numerous shorter works. He went on writing until January 2003, after 45 years producing his last report on religion for the Annual Register of World Events.

A tall, gaunt figure with a mass of hair and erect bearing, Parrinder always had a twinkle in his eye, an infectious smile and a welcoming gesture. Family and friends knew him as a spirited, witty raconteur with a love of stimulating conversation, whether pursuing an intellectual or political argument, or just small talk about the latest academic affairs. Although he had taken all his degrees externally, he never boasted about his extraordinary academic achievements. He remained always humble and kind, even a little shy.

He is survived by his wife, and their son and daughter. One son predeceased him.

· *Edward Geoffrey Simons Parrinder, academic and Methodist minister, born April 10 1910; died June 16 2005*

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## Conclusion

This book was published in England. But it really needs to be distributed in the USA, a multicultural and multi-religious society. Books like this will create a healthy Judaeo-Christian-Muslim dialogue and dispel many misconceptions about the faith and practice of Islam. This book is a gold-mine of information for creating religio-cultural harmony in multi-religious societies.