When Jesus and Muhammad ‘ascended’ to heaven

Sunlight looks a little different on this wall than it does on that wall, and a lot different on this other one, but it is still one light. (Jalaluddin Rumi)

On two days this week, Christians and Muslims celebrate the ascension to heaven of their beloved Jesus and Muhammad. In spite of their differences, ascending to heaven is something Jesus and Muhammad have in common.

In Christianity, ascension is part of the Paschal Mystery (referring to the passion, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ), which is a core doctrine of the church. Ascension is pursued as an indication of an essential component of salvation history.

In Islam, ascension is part of the Islamic tradition, is a fabulous nighttime journey through the heavens, during which the Prophet Muhammad encountered angels, many of the major prophets and, finally, God. Muhammad’s ascension is considered the pinnacle of Islamic spirituality, as the ultimate state of tawhid, which was totally realized by the Prophet.

The significance of the meetings lies in the fact that the spiritual physical presence of the Prophet before Allah signifies, on the one hand, the establishment of the direct link with Allah, which was broken with the expulsion of Adam from heaven, and indicates, on the other hand, the physical resurrection of mankind. The journey constitutes a positive movement of the Prophet toward Allah, leaving behind what is other than he/she/it.

The ascension was a strictly vertical affair. It meant the disassociation from the corrupt realm of material existence, a movement for the human man that entailed a repudiation of the temporal creation with its inherently unstable mixture of flesh and spirit.

The ascension makes the climax of Jesus’ history and the eschatological event, fulfilling all the prophetic hope of Israel (Douglas B. Farrow, 1999).

As the completion of Christ’s work on earth, the ascension was interpreted by Christianity’s founding fathers as the climax of redemption, in so far as it completed the movement of Jesus from humiliation through glorification. The theological aspects of ascension can be explored by maintaining the physicality of the event and advocating an ascension of Jesus in flesh.

The words in Acts 1:8, “Jesus being taken up into the air,” are interpreted as a movement of the flesh. The church’s fathers also insisted that Jesus ascended in the flesh. This affirmation is crucial to understand the concept of the descent of the holy spirit as the continuing presence of God with the people.

The question of whether the event and the ascension of the Prophet Muhammad was of a purely spiritual nature or whether it was also physical has left many Muslim scholars pondering also. Based on all the considerations, however, this question is not essential in the light of the teachings that can be drawn from this extraordinary experience undergone by the Prophet (Raman, 2007).

Consequently, even though Jesus in heaven, he is by no means absent but present in the spirit. It can be said that the reason that Jesus ascended was to enable the holy spirit to pour forth gifts on humanity.

Muhammad, after his inevitable dialogue with God when he ascended to the highest heaven, returned to this world and his beloved community. This is the basic difference between the mystical types of religion; a difference so succinctly summed up by Muhammad Iqbal at the beginning of the fifth chapter of his lectures on The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam, where he quotes the saying of the Indian scribe, Abdul Quddus Gangohi, “Muhammad of Arabia ascended to the highest heaven and returned. I swear by God, had I been in this place, I would not have come back” (Iqbal, 1930).

If for Christians, Christ is the model for ministry (imitatio Christi), it also reminds Muslims to imitate their prophet Muhammad (imitatio Muhammadis) for whom, as Muhammad is n授予 waala (the beautiful model).

This ascension also shows that Jesus’ ministry is accredited by the public credentials of his suffering service.

In Islam, according to the Koran, a commitment to God’s people (service) is also an important part of Islam. It is an inescapable part of a commitment to God. The Koran links tawwaqi (piety) to social interaction and concern for others, such as sharing, fulfilling covenants and, especially, kindness (Q 52:3; 71-2; 3; 376; 7:52; 3:172; 4:166; 5:93; 16:127).

Thus, religion is not only what we believe but also how we live.

Indeed, one of the most important principles for which the Koranic Jesus stands forth both as a “symbol” and concrete embodiment, is the following mercy and compassion are the fruits of the realization of the true self — or “the Self of the Real”, the Nafs al-Haqq, as the Arab bi-calls it. Jesus is described in the Koran as “a sign for mankind and a mercy from Us”.

The Koran tells us that Jesus was indeed God’s word, “cast unto Mary, and a spirit from Him” (IV:171). Ibn ‘Arabi comments upon this, saying that Gabriel transmitted this word to Mary just as a prophet transmits God’s word to his community (Ibn Arabi, 1320). Ibn ‘Arabi, thus, shows that there is something in the very substance of Jesus that is, in and of itself, a revelation, a “sign for mankind”, as the Koran says (XIX:21).

This Islamic Jesus narrows the gap that separates a Muslim from a Christian conception of the “mes-sage” of Christ.

Quoting a senior rabbi, “God has spoken to mankind in many languages, through Judaism to the Jew, Christianity to Christians, Islam to Muslims [...] no one creed has a monopoly of spiritual truth [...] In heaven there is truth, on earth there are truths. God is greater than religion. He/She is only partially comprehended by any faith,” (The Guardian, 2002). Rumi also reminds us with his question, “How long will you play at loving the shape of the jug? Go seek the water!” (Mathnawi II).

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