

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Tarif Khalidi, ed., trans. *The Muslim Jesus: Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2001. x + 246 pp. \$18.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-674-01115-1; \$22.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-00477-1.

Reviewed by Raziuddin Aquil (Fellow in History, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, India)

Published on H-Mideast-Medieval (June, 2003)



This compilation of some three hundred anecdotes ascribed to Jesus the son of Mary, with detailed notes on their origins and contexts in which they flourished, reveals Tarif Khalidi's profound understanding of diverse religious traditions competing with and appropriating from each other. In this case the most towering figure of Christianity, Jesus Christ, has been completely Islamized as a prophet, ascetic, political commentator, and Sufi saint. Fascinating depictions of Jesus occur in a wide range of sources in classical and vernacular Islamic languages such as Arabic, Persian, and Urdu. The author has drawn on the Arabic works of ethics and popular devotion, *belles-lettres*, Sufism, anthologies of wisdom (*Hikmah*), and collections of the tales of prophets and holy men. The literature belongs to the period between the second and twelfth centuries of Islam (or the eighth to the eighteenth centuries A.D.), covering large swathes of territory from Spain in the West to China in the East. Together they constitute a large corpus of episodes referring to Jesus, christened by Khalidi the "Muslim gospel" (p. 3).

The narratives have been arranged in chronological order. Where several variants of a particular story are available, a complete translation of the earliest recorded version has been published with notes including references to later sources. The attribution of a common tale to other prophets and saintly Muslims, in earlier or later works, has also been pointed out. The notes are followed by commentaries, which include bio-bibliographical details about the narrators and parallel accounts in early Islamic traditions, mainly the Quran and Hadith, the Gospels and the so-called apocryphal Christian literature, and works of wisdom belonging to the ancient Hel-

lenistic civilization. A long, but succinct, introduction locates the Muslim gospel in a broad cultural, theological, and historical context.

The earliest sayings and stories in this collection were transmitted through Muslim ascetic literature, pertaining to the second and third Islamic centuries, with Iraq—in particular, the city of Kufa—being "the original home of the Muslim gospel" (p. 31). However, many reputed collectors also belonged to a wider geographical expanse, including the Hijaz, Syria, and Egypt. They specialized in such diverse subjects as Hadith, Quranic commentary, jurisprudence, grammar, history, genealogy, and political theory. Following the complete appropriation of Jesus as a Muslim prophet in the Quran, the earliest material highlights the messianic role of Jesus on the Day of Judgment. Informed by some variants of Eastern Christianity, as were the Gospels later on, early Muslim dogma formulated the notion of the resurrection of Jesus, along with the Mahdi, or the Messiah, for establishing a truly Islamic society and system of governance before the end of the world. As a patron saint of Muslim mysticism, Jesus is supposed to serve as the rallying point on Doomsday for those who renounced the world and made pious exertions to follow the path shown by God. A large number of the sayings, thus, extolled the virtues of poverty, humility, silence, and patience. All of these have a clear Quranic imprint. The early material also included Gospel-like sayings, which were modified in such a way as to acquire a "distinctly Islamic stamp" (p. 33). For instance, Jesus is quoted in Matthew as saying: "Happier those who hear the word of God and keep it." On the other hand, the Muslim Jesus is more direct: "Blessed is he who reads the Quran and does what is in it" (p. 33).

These early sayings had a doctrinal content, as Khalidi has shown, in that some of them echoed intra-Muslim polemics, sectarian divisions, and political instability, which shook the dominion of Islam for over a century after the death of Prophet Muhammad (d. 632). The Islamic Jesus is represented as being closer to the quietist Muslim group, the Murji'a, which put emphasis on respect for the faithful rather than the condemnation of the sinner. However, some of the statements attributed to Jesus provide a trenchant critique of the religious scholars who sold their knowledge and sided with the powers-that-be for worldly gains. Later reports further refined the political views of Christ and, like adaptations from Persian wisdom and utterances of ancient Greek masters, reconfigured them with Muslim piety and ethics as outlined in Arabic *belles-lettres*. Eventually, as a pious ascetic, exemplar of social and ethical model, devotee of God, miracle worker, and healer, the personality of Jesus went on to occupy a central position in Sufi fraternities—a figure close to the fourth caliph, 'Ali ibn Abi Talib (d. 661), cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad.

The approach towards Jesus in later literary traditions is somewhat different from the references to him in the Quran, though as a Muslim prophet his portrait is made to conform to the broad framework of Islam. Unlike other prominent prophets, such as Abraham, Moses, Joseph, and David, who were appropriated by Islam without much difficulty, Jesus had to be confronted and made to deny the claims of his divinity. The accounts of his crucifixion were also rejected. Jesus thus “cleansed” himself of the corruptions of his followers to gain the position of the second most revered prophet after Muhammad. This polemic may be located in the prevalent religious culture of pre-Islamic Arabia, inaccurately condemned as violent and blind in early Muslim sources. As Khalidi has pointed out, Arabia on the eve of Islam was “the home of a rich diversity of religious traditions,” including “a multifaceted Christianity” and Judaism “of uncertain doctrinal orientation” (p. 7). Also, as the Quran reveals, the protracted struggle for dominance between the Roman and Persian empires was being watched with concern by Prophet Muhammad and his adversaries, mainly the pro-Persian Quraysh.[1]

In formulating its foundational categories as the last of the great Semitic religions, Islam was very inclusive of the “People of the Book” (*zimmis*), who were to be protected, reformed, and assimilated. However, as the successor of Christianity, it had to vigorously refute some of the fundamental beliefs of its predecessor. In doing so, the difference between the pagans (*kafirs*) of Ara-

bia and pious Christians was taken into consideration all along. Muhammad tolerated the presence of the Jews and Christians, engaged in discussions with them, and in fact identified himself with the broader Judeo-Christian traditions of the Middle East. In hostile contexts, however, the Messenger of God was seen to be distancing himself from the religious customs and practices of the Jews and Christians. Any opposition to the Prophet's religio-political authority was to be crushed. This is also true for the early caliphs. In a major and exceptional departure from the Quranic injunction, the second caliph, 'Umar ibn al-Khattab (d. 644), decried Muslim men marrying the daughters of the “People of the Book,” and instructed one of his governors to divorce his Coptic wife. The justification was as exclusionist as the endeavor to strengthen Arab Islam. It was suggested that if everybody started marrying Jewish and Christian women, none would remain to take care of the Arab Muslim women.

Thus, the distance between Islam and Christianity continued to increase over time. Khalidi has suggested that the Muslim gospel can dispel much of the tension between the two great religious traditions (p. 45). Perhaps this reconciliatory approach has led Khalidi to ignore the later historical processes such as the Crusades, Christianity's association with European colonialism, Orientalists' demonization of Islam, and the phobia of Muslim power, which further contributed to the widening of the gulf. No wonder then that the polemicists have continued to ignore the veneration of Jesus in Islamic societies, despite the fact that the touching images of Muslim Jesus have been known in the West for at least two centuries now. It may also be pointed out that the appropriation of Jesus in a “new environment” (p. 5) of Islam is not a case of cultural cross-referencing in the sense of an intolerant Islamic Orient borrowing from an enlightened and liberal Christian West. Jesus, it may be recalled, was very much a Middle Eastern figure. Notwithstanding the suspicions and acrimony, Medieval Christianity and Islam constituted a shared religious and cultural heritage. Tarif Khalidi deserves commendation for highlighting Muslim devotion for 'Isa Ruh Allah at a time when Islam and Christianity are being projected, in both academic and popular writings, as two distinct and mutually antagonistic civilizations and cultures. To conclude with a saying attributed to Jesus, who was once asked: “Spirit and Word of God, who is the most seditious of men? ”: he replied, “the scholar who is in error. If a scholar errs, a host of people will fall into error because of him.”

Note

[1]. *Surah 30: Al-Rum*.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-mideast-medieval>

Citation: Raziuddin Aquil. Review of Khalidi, Tarif, ed.; trans, *The Muslim Jesus: Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature*. H-Mideast-Medieval, H-Net Reviews. June, 2003.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7730>

Copyright © 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.