

August 10, 2008
The Sunday After the Dormition

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Although I think it obvious that Muslims and Christians nowadays should talk to one another in civil, respectful, and sympathetic tones, it would also be a good thing, I believe, for Christians to have a well informed, critical discussion about Islam among themselves. Indeed, this second discussion should logically come first. That is to say, prior to engaging in dialogue with Islam, especially on theological matters, we Christians should already have made some initial assessment of the Islamic religion in the light of the Gospel.

First, let me suggest that, in making such an assessment, a matter of early inquiry should be the mission of Muhammad.

Perhaps a word of caution is proper on this point: Not for a minute do I presume that the historical and religious significance of Islam is reducible to Muhammad's life and teaching. Indeed, Mecca's prophet himself would be the first to dispute such a presumption. If I understand him correctly, he did not think of himself as the founder of a new religion, but as the spokesman for an old one. In fact, Muslims do not regard Muhammad as a religious founder.

Still, I don't see how Islam, as a historical phenomenon, can be entirely separated from Muhammad. It is surely appropriate to consider Islam by starting with him.

Second, let us not succumb to the temptation to treat Muhammad as a religious theorist, for he insisted he was not. We should take seriously, rather, his claim that all his religious teaching came to him from an angelic source--the Angel Gabriel.

Third, the New Testament obliges us to assess this kind of claim: "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1). Thus, we are required to test that spirit who spoke to Muhammad. Was it Gabriel or some other spirit disguised as an angel of light? (2 Corinthians 11:14)

Fourth, we need not flip a coin to decide this obviously important question, because the standard for such a test is readily available. That standard, according to the Apostle John, is orthodox Christology: "By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God" (1 John 4:1-2). Confession of the true identity of Jesus Christ, then, is the criterion by which we discern what sort of spirit spoke to Muhammad.

Fifth, this is, I submit, the evidence by which we recognize that Muhammad was deceived. Because this spirit, who claimed to be the Angel Gabriel, led him to deny the true identity of Jesus Christ, Muhammad was the victim, not simply of a

theological error, but of a demonic lie. He received his revelation from an evil spirit, not a spirit sent from the one true God. Muhammad's was not a simple unbelief. It was an explicit, proclaimed, militant denial based on the false testimony of a demon. Against that denial, John testifies, "God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him" (4:9).

Sixth, his repudiation of the personal claims of Jesus Christ puts in doubt the very proposition that Muhammad knew the one true God at all. According to Christian theology, it is impossible to deny Jesus as Son and somehow hang on to the Father: "Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father either; he who acknowledges the Son has the Father also" (2:23).

Finally, there was a special malice in the disguise chosen by Muhammad's demon: the Angel Gabriel. Gabriel was the messenger, we recall, who was chosen by the Father to announce the Incarnation of the Son. It was the lightsome Gabriel who declared of Jesus, "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest" (Luke 1:32).

If we chose the strongest negative terms to describe the mission and significance of Muhammad, it would be difficult to exceed the harsh judgment of the Apostle John: "Who is a liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist who denies the Father and the Son." (1 John 2:22; cf. 4:3). In short, simple fidelity to the clear teaching of the New Testament exacts of us a very negative assessment of the mission and claims of Muhammad. At best, he was a man seriously deceived.

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