

The Prayer of an Islamic-Christian Heart

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“المسيح عيسى ابن مريم اغفر لي أنا الخاطيء وارحمنا”

“Christ, Isa Son of Mary, forgive me, the sinner, and have mercy on us”

The Prayer of the Heart, also known as the Prayer of the Name of Jesus, can be traced back to the early Christian communities. According to St. Paul, we should “pray without ceasing” (Thessalonians 5: 17). This prayer has been widely taught in Eastern monachism and theologically reflected upon throughout the history of the Eastern Churches. It is repeated continually as personal ascetic practice, being an integral part of the eremitic spiritual tradition known as Hesychasm (to keep stillness), and largely described in The Philokalia, a collection of quotations from the Eastern Fathers. The spiritual father/mother proposes the prayer wording to the beginner who will repeat it seeking deepness and sincerity until his heart opens up and unites with the mystery of Jesus himself. There rises the prayer of the Holy Spirit, the most personal and intimate, a spring welling up from deep within.

The Prayer of the Heart has somehow an equivalent in the Roman Catholic rosary which has developed to hold a similar place in the Christian West. Muslims have their own rosary related to the 99 Names of God, Allah, and used as well for other kinds of dhikr, formulas to continuously remember the divine mystery.

The Prayer of the Heart tunes in the double bodily rhythm of breathing and heartbeat. Those two cosmic rhythms in us interact deeply, whereby heartbeat is prior to breathing. In our mother’s womb, our heart started beating well before we were able to breathe on our own.

In the instants of silence between inspiration and expiration, the person praying will

hear the Spirit repeating the name of God, Allah, in the heart which is transformed into a space of peace and quiet, abandonment and devotion, Istislâm استسلام and Islâm إسلام – a space of communion with God, pleasure in his presence, Wisdom delighting to be with the children of men (cf. Proverbs 8: 31).

“ Isa – عيسى – ’Îsa ”

In the heart of the believer, there is no opposition between the abyssal mystery of God, Allah, the One, the Unique, and the name of “his Act in our favor”, “his Event in humanity” – Jesus, the Son. The Prayer of the Heart is simple: we wake up, work, study... and sleep with the name of Jesus, Yasû’ - ’Îsa, on our lips.

Isa is the Coranic denomination of the Son of Mary.

It is known that the name of Jesus as it is in the Greek New Testament depends on the Greek translation from Hebrew of the First Testament. In fact, it is the same name as the conqueror of the Promised Land, known in English as Joshua. In Hebrew, the original name is in fact Yehoshua’ יהושע “the Lord saves”. But this last name was already shortened in the form of Yeshûa’ יֵשׁוּעַ in the 5th Century BC (cf. Nehemiah 8:17).

Arab Christians normally use the name “Yasû’ ” rooted in Aramaic and Hebrew. How come does the Coran have a version of the name of Jesus that sounds phonetically corrupt in spite of the common Semitic linguistic context? Personally, I do not feel that the Arabic name “Isa” sounds much more different from the original Hebrew “Yeshû’ ” than the English “Jesus” or the Italian “Gesù” – aside from the different etymologic stories of the pronunciations. Arab Christians often feel the same and are therefore pleased to name “islamically” their children Isa.

Some scholars say that the Coranic name of the Son of Mary, Isa, comes most probably

from Esau עשו , the rejected brother of Jacob. In the Talmud, the name of Jesus is Yeshû ישו. Most of the scholars explain this corruption of the name of Jesus with the desire of Jews to strip off his person any references to the holy biblical person of Joshua. According to them, this traditional Talmudic version of the name of Jesus echoes the name of Esau. Knowing that in the Jewish tradition, the Roman empire and the Christians are considered as the hated Edom, the enemy of the Chosen People, this similarity between Jesus-Yeshû and Esau, Edom's ancestor, becomes meaningful.

Obviously, for a Muslim believer, the Coranic name of Jesus, Isa, is simply his real name as revealed in the holy Book of God. We take into serious consideration this position of faith. Nevertheless, the Coran was revealed in Arabic, and so far all reasonable etymological research and theological reflections based upon it are licit and useful.

Let us try a Christian reflection in the perspective of dialogue with Islam and Judaism. We know from the First Testament that Esau, Edom's (cf. Genesis 36:8) and Amalek's father (cf. Genesis 36:12), became the son-in-law of Ishmael, the Arabs' biblical ancestor (cf. Genesis 28:8-9). In the biblical tradition, Esau's descendants symbolize the absolute evil to be eradicated through extermination (cf. Exodus 17:14; Numbers 24:18-20; Deuteronomy 25:19). Like Ishmael (cf. Genesis 16:10-12) and even more heavily, Esau represents the excluded ones, and nevertheless his salvation is foreseen in an eschatological dimension (cf. Genesis 27:40).

The word "Edom" is rooted in the red lentil stew prepared by Jacob that the red-haired and hairy Esau ate, despising his birthright (cf. Genesis 27).

But if we consider that Jesus himself sided with the sinners, the rejected, the dangerous..., the name of Isa shows to be somehow appropriate and does not lessen but to the contrary emphasizes the value of the meaning of the name announced by the Angel: "The Lord saves". Jesus, Yeshûa'-Isa, "has made the two into one entity and

broken down the barrier which used to keep them apart, by destroying in his own person the hostility [...] and through the cross to reconcile them both to God in one body; in his own person he killed the hostility.” (Ephesians 2: 14-16)

In the tragedy of the Shoah, the genocide of Jews (together with Gypsies, homosexuals, handicapped etc.) looks like inverting roles, and the announced destiny of the Edomites became the destiny of the Chosen People for the shame of the Churches of the Prince of Peace.

In opposition to this tragic destiny, in Genesis 33, there is a beautiful encounter between Esau and Jacob after Jacob’s fight against the Angel of the Lord and his crossing the ford of the Jabbok river to the Holy Land. This encounter bears witness to the desire of reconciliation of Esau and Jacob. We see Jacob bowing down to the ground seven times before his brother Esau whom he had stolen the blessing after having taken his birthright (cf. Genesis 27). Esau runs to meet Jacob, embraces and kisses him. Both weep. While urging Esau to accept his gift, Jacob says to him: “For to see your face is like seeing the face of God...” (Genesis 33: 10).

This memorable encounter of the two brothers weeping reminds us of Isaac and Ishmael burying together their father Abraham in the cave of Machpelah (cf. Genesis 25: 9). Both Ishmael and Esau are ancestors of the Arabs. The last ones worthy to be saved happen to be the last ones to be named at Pentecost among the devout people from every nation under heaven assembled in Jerusalem; who heard the apostles preaching in their own language about the marvels of God: the Arabs (cf. Acts 2: 10). So far, reconciliation with Arabs becomes an eschatological sign of salvation. The good neighborhood of Muslims, Christians and Jews in the Arabic civilization is also a prophecy of peace for the world.

My use of the Coranic name Isa – given to Christ in the language of the last people saved, the Arabs – is an expression of the desire to bring back Esau’s and Ishmael’s birthright. Islam, the first born heir, sets himself up as the jealous defender of the

holiness, honor and uniqueness of God – Allah.

“المسيح عيسى ابن مريم – Christ, Isa Son of Mary”

In my prayer, I say “المسيح عيسى ابن مريم – Christ, Isa Son of Mary” which appears in verse 171 of Sûrat an-Nisâ’:

“The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, is only Allah’s messenger, and His word which He conveyed unto Mary, and a spirit from Him” (Coran, IV, 171)

”إِنَّمَا الْمَسِيحُ عَيْسَى ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ وَكَلِمَتُهُ أَلْقَاهَا إِلَىٰ مَرْيَمَ وَرُوحٌ مِنْهُ“

(سورة النساء: ١٧١).

“Son of God” – missing words?

This version of the Prayer of the Heart is slightly different from the “classical” one that reads: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner”. There seems to be missing the title “Son of God”. In my opinion, the title “Son of God” is deeply related with “Christ” inside the biblical tradition. In Arabic – also in Coranic Arabic –, Christ, the Anointed, is “al-Masîh المسيح” directly depending on Syriac and Hebrew. The name Christ/Messiah constitutes a concentration and synopsis of all attributes of the coming Savior and the King of the Last Day. As a Christian committed to interreligious dialogue and harmony-building, I enter into a deep communion with Muslims and Jews when using the title Christ which becomes in my heart an eschatological symbol of hope, source of reconciliation for the children of Abraham.

“Son of Mary”

The words “Son of Mary” are not just a Muslim expression, but rather an invitation to pray with the heart of Mary, the ever Virgin. Hallâj, the mystic martyr of Islam, speaks about the virgin point in the human heart (“Asrârûnâ bikr – بكر أسرارنا”), our abyssal mystery longing for God as the original and ultimate partner, wherein the virginal solitude with God becomes the source of all communion.

When speaking about the resurrection of the dead, Jesus says that men and women do not marry, but are like the angels in heaven (cf. Matthew 22: 30). In the gospel of Luke, this looks like happening now: “But those who are considered worthy of taking part in that age and in the resurrection from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage, and they can no longer die; for they are like the angels. They are God's children, since they are children of the resurrection.” (Luke 20:35-36) This shifting from marriage to spiritual union occurs with and through the intercession of Mary, the Mother, the mediator. The wedding at Cana (cf. John 2: 1-12) shows this movement: the newlyweds are not named in the story; the main protagonists are Jesus and his mother who he calls “woman”. The Son of God and the Daughter of Zion elevate mankind to a new and everlasting dignity of union with God, Allah almighty, through their coming passion (symbolized by the wine).

By grace, monks and nuns chose to follow the path of evangelical chastity leading to a revolutionary spiritual anthropology. They are called to go through an “angelical” mutation. It is the always ongoing transformation, break, crisis in the language and the experience of faith.

Meditating in the poverty of faith upon the mystery of Mary in the history of salvation helps us recognize her being the name of all creation, the partner of God – the Compassionate and Merciful –, the Mother of God and still a concrete woman in the village of Nazareth.

In the orthodox and catholic awareness alike, Mary is the starting point and the model

of a new humanity. In the Islamic tradition, she is the upright and “chosen” woman:

“Behold! the angels said: ‘O Mary! Allah hath chosen thee and purified thee – chosen thee above the women of universes.’” (Coran III, 42)

Those who meditate the Prayer of the Heart find in Mary an anchor that helps them bear in their heart the infinite and wide intercession of Jesus.

“Forgive me, the sinner”

When asking in my prayer for forgiveness, I said for a while “forgive us”, meaning the Community. (The suffering and interceding souls of Sufi Abdâl (redeemers through mystical substitution) recite in their hearts the request: “Allâhumma ghfer lil-Umma wa ‘aslih اللهم اغفر للأمة وأصلح”). It took me eight days of spiritual exercises to understand the danger and to realize that I was fleeing my awareness of guilt.

“Forgive me” helps me feel personally responsible for the death of Jesus and deadly in need of it. It also helps me see the extent of God’s love for me, God who considers me worth losing his Firstborn for.

In “me”, the ego, the memory of the sin itself, is stressed: my being self-centered, away from communion with God, aiming to use the power of God for my own glory: I am Adam and Eve, the Sinner. I am Peter after the miraculous catch, falling at Jesus’ knees and saying: “Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!” (Luke 5:8)

Confessing “forgive me” restores the radically personal relationship with God through the blood of his Son, Jesus of Nazareth, who by his sacrifice on the cross reestablished communion.

“Have mercy on us”

Here, there is a dynamic opposition between “me” and “us”, “forgive me” and “have mercy on us” – confessing one’s sin on the one side and asking mercy for the community on the other.

What seems to be in opposition is in reality connected: when the sinful “me”, the ego, is healed by the personal attention of God, the “us” is healed through communion. It is the “us” of the Church and the “us” of the Good Shepherd’s desire to gather in one sheepfold all his sheep, including the ones who never had the chance to hear his voice.

Such communion elevates and sublimates bonds that are natural such as family, nation, ethnicity, religious community etc. to the level of spiritual belonging in the heart of God, the Merciful – الرحمن الرحيم الله .

More and again...

In the depths of his soul, the disciple looks up at his rabbi, Jesus. He learns from him the relationship with God, Allah, because the master teaches him the Our Father, his own prayer.

A disciple naturally ought to tune in the spiritual consciousness of his master. In Jesus of Nazareth, he discovers with wonder that the Messiah goes to the Father through his own self, his own mystery as Christ and Lord, Word of God, Act of God revealing himself to humanity. This does not occur elsewhere, in a detached section of his consciousness, in a somehow conceptually separate and separable part. His divinity is rather entirely united with his human intimacy.

The Council of Chalcedon (451) says that the divine nature of Christ is conceptually and in reality other than his human nature – both being still united in the only person –

("in Christ the human and the divine nature retain each its own properties"); while the Council of Ephesus (431), in an anti-dualistic position, taught that Christ divinity represents the main actor of this original movement of salvation, the first protagonist of all that is inherent to his person. (This is said even if, because of Incarnation, this divine actor appropriates a humanity as complete as "normal" – and even normative – with created body, soul and spirit – including free human will –, and has expressed himself through humanity. Paradoxically, this humanity that looks completely overwhelmed by divinity is in fact radically promoted to its full human destiny of divinization!).

With his master, the disciple addresses God through his master's Mystery which by baptism and grace of faith is henceforth more intimate to him than his own intimacy.

It is through his holy universal Spirit that Jesus of Nazareth can be active in my spirit today. "But very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him." (John 16:7)

I ask myself whether the soul of a believer in Jesus is therefore different from that of a believer of another religious tradition, in particular of a Muslim believer. Muslims are our neighbors, our brothers, our guests!

I am aware of the fact that the phenomenology of the – male or female – spiritual guide (the "guru sacrament" according to Henri Le Saux) demonstrates how the spirit of the disciple relates to that of his master in an openness to the Absolute that appears profoundly parallel and analogue to the "Christification" and thus divinization of the believer.

Sufism has thereabout interesting, clear and fascinating teachings. The Christian friend of a Muslim joins in prayer in the depths of his soul the intimacy of prayer of Muslim souls standing before the One. Those souls are modeled after the soul of the absolute and ultimate believer, a soul perfectly confided to God in faith, completely open to his

Word and so entirely united to the prophetic revelation that the latter comes out of his mouth as Arabic Coran and flows through his life as prophetic existentiality – as such imitable, or rather to be imitated, Sunna. It goes without saying that we are speaking about the soul of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him.

In essence, the Muslim spiritual master and even the imam at the mosque act as prophetic vicars to such an extent that in some schools of Sufi teaching, the murîd (novice) has to imagine while praying the face of his spiritual master, for it is through his master's soul that he will reach authentic monotheism, union.

But let us revert to our poor Christian prayer. When I say “Christ” and Isa Ibn Maryam, I address in the first place my master in the context of a mystical interpersonal religious practice which is entirely assumed by his divinity in a humanity like mine. Then I tell him “Have mercy on me, the sinner”, and I dare ask him to forgive me since I now acknowledge, hope and believe that He is the One rushing off in search of me, He alone has life in himself, His only concern is to reinstate me in a life of communion.

(The analogy is with the “psychology” of Christ. Jesus, the Son of Mary, is a man asking the eternal Father to forgive us our sins. At the same time, he is the forgiveness of God, the Merciful, offered to us. The prayer looks like coming first, but it is the answer that is first. The one asking God to forgive us is in fact His forgiveness offered by grace for free! My relationship to the master comes first, but it ends with the divine initiative in my favor represented by him. Eventually I discover that he was first.)

And I say “the sinner” without knowing anymore who is speaking: is it I invoking mercy, for I am aware of my failings, my limits, my betrayal, the disease of my ego which transforms into rot every holy thing. And I do not really know any longer if it is him in his humanity who in me descends into hell to seek me, the deaf and dumb. From my depths (De profundis) he cries to his divinity tragically united to the disaster of his humanity and yet never separated from God, the Lord and Father. They are One in the

divine substance, in the communion of Trinitarian participation, but most of all in the love of human beings. In me, his humanity cries to his divinity. And he has mercy on us. Who? The Merciful, the Compassionate, Allah, the Father, present in his Son to make of us children fully participant in divine communion. How could this separate me from the prayer of my Muslim brothers and sisters and from all my brethrens in humanity, and so to speak in divinity?

Fri, 04/08/2011

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