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William E. Phipps, Muhammad and Jesus: A Comparison of the Prophets and Their Teachings

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(review)

It is not often that I have found myself concurring with the view that one should not read a book before reviewing it because it is inclined to prejudice one's view but, in the case of this particular volume, I am obliged to admit defeat after struggling through one third of its contents. My main reason for doing so was that I found myself becoming increasingly puzzled by the author's intention and annoyed by his comments. This was certainly not good for my soul but I make these observations for those who may wish to boldly go where I have not.

The subtitle of the book - 'A Comparison of the Prophets and Their Teachings' gives most of the game away. The author is a professor of Philosophy and Religion at Davis and Elkins College, USA and clearly not a believing Christian since he cannot bring himself to affirm that Jesus is the Son of God or believe in the truth of the resurrection. Since he is clearly not a practising Muslim either, this puts him in the best possible position to examine both religions in an attempt to promote understanding between them. Sadly, like many liberal theologians, he can only succeed in pleasing those who, like himself stand on the touchline lamenting the intransigent beliefs of those on opposing teams.

Unfortunately, Christianity is, for Orthodox believers, not a faith that can be compromised without losing its integrity any more than Islam for its adherents. It is a sad fact that compromise has led to a weakening of faith for many Christians in the West, while Islam, because of its uncompromising stance has attracted many westerners. Perhaps Islam has the advantage of fewer liberal theologians? Maintaining the truth of Orthodox Christianity is to put oneself in the eyes of writers like William Phipps, on the side of fanaticism. Perhaps Mr. Phipps should travel to countries like Egypt where the real face of fundamental Islam may be seen in all its intolerance alongside an Orthodox Christianity which suffers but does not compromise.

The basic premise of the book is that aspects of the lives and teachings of Jesus and Muhammad may be fruitfully compared and contrasted. This is fine, in theory, if there can be any comparison between a prophet with a strong political agenda and the Son of God. To ignore this distinction is to miss the whole point of Christianity. I cannot, and have no wish to comment, on what a strict Muslim believer might feel on the issue. Neither can I equate in any way what-soever a faith that preaches forgiveness and love with a religion that condemns apostates to automatic death (so-called Christians, of course, have been guilty of the latter - and not just in the distant past - but in so doing they ceased to follow the teachings of Christ, while for Muslims this is a written part of their religious faith). Mr. Phipps has an interesting quotation from another liberal theologian, Paul Knitter, at the end of his first chapter.

"Christianity, along with all other world religions, is evolving out of the micro phase of religious history in which the various traditions grew and consolidated in relative isolation from each other. The direction today is toward a macro phase of history in which each religion will be able to grow and understand itself only through interrelating with other religions."

This is liberal theological claptrap at its most obvious. Islam is growing because of its uncompromising nature while Christianity is being undermined because liberals cannot understand that there is a difference between holding an orthodox belief and wishing to hate or despise those who don't share the same belief. I cannot accept the tenets of Islam although I am capable of appreciating that many Muslims share in similar religious observances to mine, but I do not hate, despise or wish to do them harm. I will continue to pray for the time when they will come to understand that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and the time when they will no longer persecute those of their brethren who wish to become Christians.

The review has wandered far from the topic under consideration - a practice I have hitherto assiduously avoided in all my years as a reviewer. Perhaps my feeling might be appreciated by a devout Muslim asked to review 'The Satanic Verses' ! Of course, we would

not descend to burning books or issuing fatwas against the author on the grounds that his book blasphemes against Jesus Christ - perhaps another difference that ought to have been examined in more de-tail. Mr. Rushdie is not the only writer that offends many with religious sensitivities.

This is not a dangerous book - it is merely a very silly one and deserves nothing more than to be replaced on the shelf with all the other well-meaning but instantly forgettable volumes that are encountered in second-hand bookshops. It will please many RE teachers looking for 'quick-fix' approaches to comparative theology but Orthodox Christians would be advised not to waste their time.

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