4

A NEW HEART: 'ISA (JESUS) عليه السلام

Then we granted you an upper hand against them, and strengthened you with wealth and children, and multiplied your numbers. Whenever you did good, it was to your own advantage; and whenever you committed evil, it was to your own disadvantage. So, when the time of the second prophecy drew near (We raised other enemies that would) disfigure your faces and enter the Temple as they had done the first time, and destroy whatever they could lay their hands on.

(The Qur'an, 17:6-7, Bani Isra'il—
The Children of Israel)

Some two thousand years ago, the Children of Israel were indeed expecting something momentous. What they expected the Messiah to do, though, was to challenge the Romans. They did not anticipate that he would, first and foremost, challenge them.

From the Muslim point of view, and that of others as well, Jesus was a Jew, and was the Messiah. He didn't come to bring a new religion but to re-form Judaism, to put within it the heart of flesh rather than the heart of stone: where the Word of God as given to Moses had been written in stone, the Word that Jesus brought was in his heart, 'the Word made flesh'. As they had always done before, the majority of Jews rejected both Prophet and message, but there would be

no more messengers after this; at least no-one would be sent to the Jews alone.

Jesus, miraculously born of a virgin mother, who ascended to heaven at the end of his life to await his return to earth for a final violent confrontation at the end of days, is a figure common to both Muslims and Christians. It is the arguments as to the nature of Jesus that divide: the God-in-person, the Trinity, beliefs which seem to be indispensable to the Christian belief that theirs is the final revelation. From a Muslim point of view, though, they are arguments that, in trying to elevate him, obscure part of his universal significance.

Beneath the supposed site of the crucifixion in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem is a place that is known as the Chapel of Adam. This underground grotto was identified, legend has it, following a dream by Saint Helena, the mother of Roman Emperor Constantine, and the 'skull of Adam' was duly found there. Its position for early Christians gained its significance from the symbolism of the blood of Jesus flowing down and washing away the sin of the first man.

The grotto legend is unlikely to be true; but it serves to highlight the position of Jesus in Christian belief and the necessity of his coming to vanquish humanity's 'Original Sin'. Christians believe that we inherit the sin of Adam's disobedience in the Garden, and thus merited God's fierce anger until Jesus died to cleanse humanity of that sin. Thenceforward, people had to believe in him, or Him, to be saved and to receive eternal life. In contrast, Muslims believe that our Adamic nature means that we are clay animated by the breath of God and so contain reflections of all the supreme attributes of God (who, among many attributes, is the Compassionate, *Al-Rahman*, and the Merciful, *Al-Rahim*). Our flaw is that we have the potential to be tempted by Satan, who can assume many guises to do so. Thus, what we need is knowledge of a way to live with that nature, which we believe we have in Islam. We see Jesus, among others, as

bringing this example, rather than performing a cosmic reparation of that nature.

In comparing Jesus as he appears in the Bible, or at least in orthodox Christian belief, with Jesus ('Isa) in the Qur'an there appear to be four further differences. The first of these is that the life and meaning of the Qur'anic Jesus is described relatively briefly and simply, while the life and meaning of the Jesus of the Bible is depicted in an extensive and often contradictory way. This difference amplifies the other three main differences, these being: his intended audience; the nature of Jesus (whether Prophet and Messiah, or Son of God, or God Himself, ideas from which was eventually deduced the existence of the Holy Trinity); and finally, the appearance or fact of the Crucifixion. Jesus, 'Isa, the Jewish Messiah, a human Prophet of supernatural birth, serving God, and saved from crucifixion despite appearances, essentially characterises the Islamic viewpoint, while Jesus as the supernatural Son of God, one member of the Holy Trinity, crucified to appease God's anger against humanity, broadly (though not entirely) characterises the Christian.

The question of Jesus' intended audience helps us to focus on where the sense lies in these points of view. Ancient prophecy had always seen the Messiah as a liberator for Jews. Even if we consider Jesus as he is depicted in the Synoptic Gospels (those of Matthew, Mark and Luke) he seems to have come for the Jews alone:

> These twelve [disciples] went forth, and he commanded them, saying 'Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not. But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.'
>
> (Matthew 10:5-6)

He preached the coming of the kingdom of God (though he also described the kingdom of God as already existing, but existing as a seed that was beginning to grow) and called the people of Israel to enter it, using parables of weddings and

feasts (Luke 14:15-24 and Matthew). These parables are used because they are things that at least some Jews would understand, though Jesus also refers back to Isaiah (6:9-10) who said that the people would hear but not understand, and see but not perceive.

Similarly, in the Qur'an, 'Isa is the son who was born to Maryam, whom the Angel Gabriel (Jibril) said would be 'a Messenger to the Tribe of Israel' (3:48), and 'a pattern for the Tribe of Israel' (43:59). He would be the last of the succession of Jewish Prophets, 'confirming what was revealed before him in the Torah and a guide to those who have *Taqwa* (fear of God)' (5:46); he was taught by God in wisdom, in the Book, the Torah and the *Injil* (the original Gospel). However, he would also be of universal significance— 'a sign for mankind, a mercy from Us' (19:21), a 'sign to all the worlds' (21:91) and 'illustrious in the world' (3:45). Significantly though, he did not intend to found a new faith.

In the Christian context, it is only in the teachings of Paul that the message becomes more universal, rather than Jewish. Paul also sees Jesus as a supernatural figure rather than a human, albeit remarkable, being. Paul was initially both a practising Jew and, unusually, a Roman citizen, who had been an active persecutor of Jewish Christians until his experience of conversion on the road to Damascus. After this, he believed that Jesus had been revealed in him (Galatians 1.16) and was the Son of God and that it was his mission to take this message to the gentiles. Thus, his influence on Christianity reflects his own path, moving from the particular (the Jewish) to the universal (Roman). Inasmuch as this brought belief in God to an enormous number of people, Muslims have no problem in seeing this as a 'mercy to the worlds'. However, this is not the same as recognising the establishment of a new religion, particularly one that has a conception of God that differs from the one that existed in Judaism. Having said that, the Qur'an also says that Christians are closer to Muslims than are Jews:

> You will find the most vehement of mankind in hostility to be the Jews and idolators. And you will find the nearest of them in affection to be those who say: Look! We are Christians. That is because there are among them priests and monks, and because they are not proud. (5:82)

In other words, the spiritual differences are greater, and more important.

There are doctrinal differences, though, and the biggest difference between Christianity and Islam concerns the very nature of God. The brief Surat Al-Ikhlas ('The Chapter of Purity') in the Qur'an is said in a Hadith to be equivalent to half of the entire Qur'an. It says:

> God is One, the Eternal God. He begetteth none, nor was He begotten. None is equal to Him. (112:1-4)

It asserts unambiguously the uniqueness of God and, in 'He begetteth none', specifically states that a Son of God, in the sense of a divine person proceeding from another divine person, is anathema. Another verse says: 'Those who say: 'Verily God is the Messiah, son of Maryam,' have indeed disbelieved.' (5:17)

Even in the New Testament, it seems fair to say that, although the ideas became the central plank in Christianity's whole doctrinal system, neither Jesus the Son of God nor Jesus as God in human form are concepts unambiguously supported by the text. When, addressing Jesus as 'Good Master', a ruler asked what he should do to inherit eternal life, Jesus did not answer the question but replied: 'Why callest thou me good? None is good, save one, that is, God' (Luke 18:19). These are not the words of one who thinks he is God.

Though Muslims do not see Jesus as God, he is nonetheless different. Like Adam, 'Isa was born without a father, as we will discuss below. Also, unlike the Prophets of

the Jewish Bible, he never speaks words given to him by God. 'On the contrary, he speaks with great immediacy and freedom on his own authority, often without appealing to the authority of either God, scripture or tradition.' (Don Cupitt and Peter Armstrong, *Who Was Jesus?*' p.64.) However, this does not contradict the Muslim belief that the essence of the message was the same. Muslims often understand the Book he brought, the *injil*, to be his heart.

The Qur'an also says that he was even more blessed than some of the Prophets: 'And of these messengers We have made some to excel others […] and We gave 'Isa son of Maryam clear signs and strengthened him with the pure spirit.' (2:253) What was different about him was an essential purity of spirit.

While the events before the birth of Jesus are similar in the Bible and the Qur'an, there is a significantly different event after the birth. In the Qur'an, when Maryam took the child back to her people, they immediately concluded the worst, and said: 'O Maryam, you have indeed come with something deceitful! O sister of Haroun, your father was not a wicked man and your mother was never immoral!' (19:28) Obeying the command to keep silent, her reply was simply to point at the child, who then began speaking:

> 'Verily I am the slave of God. He has given me the Book, and He has made me a Prophet, and He has made me blessed wherever I may be, and He has made the prayer and the *zakat* (almsgiving) obligatory for me as long as I live, and He has made me obedient towards the one who bore me, and He has not made me tyrannical or ungrateful – and peace be on me the day I was born, and the day I die, and the day I shall be brought back to life!' (19:33)

That the Jews knew they were in the presence of someone special is highlighted by a commentary made by Sayyid Mawdudi on this incident. He makes the point that Mary

was not an unknown woman, but a God-fearing and devout member of the house of Aaron whose guardian was the highly respected Jerusalem patriarch, Zechariah. She had lived a life of devotion, secluded for much of the time in the Temple. Thus her pregnancy and childbearing would hardly go unnoticed, while the refutation from the mouth of the infant would be an event that many would know about and remember, should this child grow up to claim to be a Prophet, as of course he did.

> Now, if those people still refused to recognise him as a Prophet, and instead of dutifully following him, charged him with being a criminal and sought to crucify him, they should be dealt a punishment more severe than that meted out to all other peoples.
>
> (Sayyid Abu A'la Mawdudi, *Towards Understanding the Qur'an*, Vol. V, 156–7.)

When 'Isa began teaching, his message was to bring the Children of Israel back to the teachings of Musa in accordance with the Torah, 'to make plain some of that about which you differ' (43:63) and 'to make some of what used to be forbidden for you lawful for you.' (3:50) He brought the *Injil*, the Gospel, though this wasn't a written book. Rather, he was 'the word made flesh'. The wisdom he had he carried in his heart showed in his actions and words. He healed the blind and the leper, he raised the dead with the permission of God, he breathed life into a clay bird he had made and it became a live bird, and he could tell people what they had eaten and what they had stored away at home, all in the name of God.

Ultimately, this message proclaimed something distinct from that of the religion that was being practised by the Children of Israel at that time, most particularly by the Jewish priesthood, the Pharisees. It was also distinct from the political struggle the revolutionaries wanted, and it is due to both of these factors that he was rejected by the majority of

the Jewish people. After the death of John the Baptist, Jesus went up to Jerusalem to take his message to the people there, and this is when he 'cleansed' the temple of its moneylenders. This militancy brought him into conflict with the religious authorities. According to the Qur'an as well as the New Testament, they plotted to have him killed fearing that, as well as threatening their authority, Jesus was likely to provoke a violent Roman reaction. If there is truth in the story of the robber or insurrectionist Barabbas, whose crucifixion Pontius Pilate unsuccessfully offered to the crowd as an alternative to that of Jesus, both sides in the Jewish community, rebels and collaborators, tried to have Jesus killed. However, according to the Qur'an, they did not succeed. 'And they planned, and God planned—and God is the best of planners.' (3:54)

It is this, the end of Jesus' time on earth, that provides the final departure-point for Muslims and Christians. In the New Testament, at the farewell meal on the eve of Passover (*Pesach*), Jesus speaks of his coming death as the climax of his life. He associates the bread that he breaks with his person, and the wine with his blood (his death), and he tells the disciples that the 'kingdom of God' lies beyond his death. In the Garden of Gethsemane afterwards he is arrested by Temple police (and Roman soldiers, according to the Gospel of John). He has a hearing in front of the Jewish authorities, who conclude that there are enough grounds for him to be tried by the Romans for high treason. According to the Gospel writers, he is condemned to death by them and crucified with two criminals. He dies on the same day and is buried by sympathisers. To Christians, what happened next, after Jesus' death, is more important than anything he achieved in his life for, according to the New Testament, he rose bodily from the grave, thus triumphing over death and cleansing humanity of Adam's 'primordial sin', before ascending to heaven to sit 'at God's right hand'.

According to the Qur'an, however, there was indeed an ascension into heaven (a mosque in Jerusalem commemorates

it), but no crucifixion, at least, not of Jesus: 'And they did not kill him and they did not crucify him, but it appeared so to them.' (4:157)

There is some apparent ambiguity in these words. It has been pointed out that they could merely mean that someone else did the crucifying, such as the Romans—one translation says that 'only a likeness of that was shown to them', rather than 'but so it appeared to them'. This is a far more active sense that suggests that there was a substitution of the crucified person.

The most important line, however, comes next, because it effectively renders the crucifixion unimportant, or no less so than the death of John the Baptist or other Prophets who had been put to death previously, because, as mentioned above, the event has no religious significance in Islam:

> And verily those who disagree with this cannot be sure—they have no knowledge about it except their speculation. They did not kill him for certain. God took him up to Himself. And there is not one of the People of the Book who will not believe in him before his death—and on the Day of Resurrection he will be a witness against them.
>
> (4:157-159)

In the New Testament, when asked for a sign by the Pharisees, Jesus himself implies that he will not die:

> 'An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas: For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.'
>
> (Matthew 12:39-40)

As he and his hearers well knew, Jonas was *alive* for those three days and three nights in the whale.

Initially, the disciples and Jesus's other followers continued to spread the teachings of their master to other Jews. One of these was Paul. He had never actually met Jesus but had experienced conversion from persecution of, to belief in, the followers of Jesus. As a result of this experience, he believed that belief in Jesus should be spread to non-Jews too. This led to a sharp doctrinal struggle with the original disciples and the subsequent loss of the two most distinctive features of Jewish life among Jesus's followers: circumcision and the consumption of lawfully-killed meat. As the religion became less Jewish in practice, the Jewish language about the expected Messiah gave way to the more culturally familiar notion (at least to the non-Jewish pagans and non-Palestinian Jews to whom Paul preached) of a divine redeemer visiting the earth. In initiating this, it is *Paul* who appears to be virtually the founder of a new religion. It was one that was in some ways monotheistic but that was ambiguous (or mistaken) about the nature of Jesus in a way that would later allow the concept of the Holy Trinity to become the cornerstone of the Christian Church. In this, as in other ways, Pauline Christianity does not seem to accord well with what Jesus taught or intended; indeed, Paul hardly ever quotes Jesus, or refers to his own recorded teachings.

This was not the only struggle being enacted in Palestine at this time, however. Indeed, to most it would have appeared relatively minor. According to the New Testament, Jesus foretold the destruction of Jerusalem: 'Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another, that will not be thrown down' (Matthew 24:2). Though many did not believe *in* him they nonetheless believed *like* him that they were living in the end of days and that the confrontation between the Romans and the Jews was the greatest sign of this.

There had been revolts among the Jews since the time of Jesus' birth, with regular massacres by the Romans in response. Two thousand were crucified in 4 BCE, while three thousand Passover pilgrims were slaughtered in the

Temple court by Archelaus, one of the sons of Herod. As today, this level of suffering among people defined by faith produced a murderous anger that seemed to be its antithesis, and also perhaps made the anger of the minority more powerful than the majority's natural preference for avoiding conflict. Jews were further divided among themselves: there were the Temple-based, ritualistic Sadducees, despised for their collaboration with the Romans; the middle class Pharisees, who provided a supposed link with the ordinary people; the unworldly Essenes who awaited the Messiah in their remote Dead Sea community in Qumran; the Zealots, or Sicarii, who were freedom fighters or terrorists (depending on one's point of view), who believed rebellion to be a holy duty; finally there were the Jewish followers of Jesus themselves. There was also a large non-Roman gentile population. According to Karen Armstrong, the relationship of Jew to Roman was not wholly antagonistic. With a population accounting for one tenth of the Empire, Jews were a sizeable minority whose moral character and 'more encompassing divinity' were attractive to a society that was trying to outgrow its total reliance on force and its traditional pantheon of gods. She cites good relations between the two in Palestine, though this apparent contradiction perhaps rather suggests how deep the internal Jewish splits had become.

The irony, the not particularly helpful might-have-been, is instead of the foundation of Roman Catholicism in the 4th century, a reformed Roman Judaism in the 1st under Jesus could have prevailed instead. If only … But though Jesus had what could be called something for everyone: he was as well-versed as the Sadducees, debating Mosaic law in the Temple at the age of twelve; as innovative as the Pharisees' preaching of a compassionate God; as holy as the Essenes and as revolutionary as the Zealots, none could identify fully with him. For the Sadducees, his teachings seemed to make their role as guardians of a Temple-centred religion less essential; while he was too critical of the worldliness of the Pharisees

('Ye shut up heaven against men!' Matthew 23); to the Essenes, he threatened their elite position; and he was not political enough for the Zealots. Each group was more guided by its own self-importance, although what was needed was a novel, epoch-marking submission to the message brought by this servant of God. Stiff-necked, though, the Children of Israel lived up to their biblical name as those who 'struggled with God'. But this time they did not prevail.

Tensions and incidents continued until 66CE when the Roman procurator Gessius Florus seized a large amount of money from the Temple and massacred a number of furious Jews who objected. This led to the Temple priests refusing to carry out the established sacrifice to Caesar, thus breaking all ties with Rome. This in turn led to disputes between the Zealots and those Jews who wished for a reconciliation with Rome, a dispute that the Roman garrison at Jerusalem at first tried to suppress. The soldiers soon, however, found themselves surrounded. Although Herod Agrippa II, the Jewish king of the Galilee, mediated and the soldiers surrendered under terms, they were attacked and slaughtered by the Zealots as they marched out unarmed. Thus should the Syrians of, say, Caesarea choose to massacre almost the entire Jewish community of that city, some 20,000 people, as they did, Gessius Florus could only feel vindicated, perhaps even pleased.

With such enormous loss of life, revolt became unstoppable and spread throughout the country. The near-successful Roman capture of Jerusalem by Cestius Gallus turned to defeat as the retreating army was attacked at Beth-Horon, but by now the Romans were determined to end the troubles once and for all. Vespasian, credited for this and later deeds as the man who saved the Roman Empire, ruthlessly led his army through the Galilee, crushing all resistance, and finally laid siege to Jerusalem. Civil war in Rome saved Jerusalem temporarily, with Vespasian returning there to become emperor, but his son Titus resumed the campaign.

The siege, which began in the spring of the year 70CE, was bloody and desperate, and lasted some five months. The Jews inside were starving and fighting desperately with the Romans, but also fought so severely among themselves that, according to Josephus (a Jewish former governor of the Galilee who had gone over to the Roman side), many Jerusalemites wished for Roman victory. Finally, although Titus may have wanted to spare the Temple, when the Romans broke through, the Temple area burnt out of control, and the soldiery showed no mercy to the inhabitants. As Josephus wrote:

> The Temple Hill, enveloped in flames from top to bottom, appeared to be boiling up from its very roots; yet the sea of flame was nothing to the ocean of blood, or the companies of killers to the armies of killed: nowhere could the ground be seen between the corpses, and the soldiers climbed over the heaps of bodies as they chased the fugitives.

Thousands had died in battle or from hunger. Of the survivors some were executed, others cast into slavery, consigned to the amphitheatres or sent to Rome. Significantly, one, Rabbi Yohannan, was smuggled out of the city in a coffin. He had opposed the confrontation with the Romans, believing Jews would be better off stateless, and he thus became an ideal leader of post-destruction Jewry. With Roman permission he set up a Pharisaic community near Jerusalem and this became the foundation of a new conception of Judaism, one that was not land-dependant, and which would supply the doctrine of most Jews until the aftermath of the Second World War. The destruction of Jerusalem effectively ended their role as a proselytising faith. The trauma of the city's loss now became an essential feature of belief and ritual: even today the goblet crushed underfoot at weddings is accompanied by the words 'No joy is complete without remembrance of the destruction of

Jerusalem,' while an acceptance of guilt for the failure to live in the land became a characteristic trait. Stateless, the Jews became passive as far as national history was concerned.

This marginalisation of the role of the Jews, something that Christianity has never been entirely comfortable with, has been at least a partial cause of fierce Christian anti-Jewish feelings ever since as it allowed Christians to project their own insecurity about their faith onto a much weaker Other, producing what Dan Cohn-Sherbok calls 'The Longest Hatred'. Fear of this disconfirming Other actually increased after Christians ceased to see their own truths as self-evident in the 19th century, and particularly in the 20th century after the Holocaust. However, this fear can also be seen at its inception, where a principle that was pure and literally heaven-sent was adapted to suit this world which was, at that time, effectively Roman and polytheistic.

Some idea of how far this adaptation went becomes apparent when we learn something of the beliefs of Paul's home town, Tarsus. The town, which stands in what is now Turkey, was then the centre for the Romanised Babylonian mystery cult of Mithraism, in which a god known as *sol invictus*, the sun god (which even allows a pun on 'son of God' in English), was born on 25th December. This god died by self-sacrifice for the sins of human beings, dying in the form of a bull. His flesh and blood were then eaten as a way of achieving redemption. So similar was all this to what became Christian practice that St Augustine called it the devil's ploy, a shadow Christianity designed to make Christians into unbelievers. However, modern historians often suggest that it was this familiarity that helped to make unbelievers into Christians, with Christianity finally becoming the dominant religion of the Western world after Constantine's conversion in 325 CE and the forceable suppression of paganism. Not only ideas of blood atonement, but also the polytheistic strain of Mithraic religion and other Triadic pagan faiths became enshrined thereafter, despite bitter arguments, in the doctrine of the Trinity.

From this we can see that, although Islam gives Jesus a significance for Jews, Christians and Muslims, at the Final Judgement it is only the Islamic understanding of Jesus that will coincide with reality. In this understanding, Jesus is the Prophet through whom the Jews were invited to follow their Law, but retrieving a spiritual dimension. And the fruition of this would come with Muhammad, as the Qur'an says Jesus himself prophesied:

> And [remember] when 'Isa son of Maryam said, 'O Tribe of Israel, verily I am the Messenger of God to you, confirming what was [revealed] before me in the Torah, and bringing news of a Messenger who will come after me, whose name is the Praised One (Ahmed).' (61.6)

A similar message is to be found in the New Testament, as we shall see in the chapter which follows. Even in Paul, often deemed responsible for the loss of the purity of Jesus's teachings, we find that in one letter he seems to recognise the destiny that was coming and the necessary limitations of his work: 'But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away.' (1 Corinthians 13:9)

Thus, at Paul's hands, humanity's relationship with its Creator took a different form. The role for which the Children of Israel had been chosen, which was to receive the Messiah, they had rejected. Instead of a faith for all mankind coming through them, something of the spirit of monotheistic universalism passed into Christianity, albeit in adapted form. As a Jewish writer puts it:

> Jesus was in the line of the great Hebrew prophets. Jesus's reiterations of Jeremiah, Isaiah and Ezekiel went unheard among nationalists preoccupied with the struggle for national freedom and racial solidarity. The Judean rabble, in rejecting the offer of Pontius Pilate to release Jesus and in choosing Barabbas, the insurrectionist and murderer, did more than turn their backs on the preacher from

> Nazareth. They pushed Judaism off the road of universalism and thus encouraged the building of a new faith around Jesus's preachments. Christianity, as a denationalisation of the Hebrew ideal, was promulgated as a universal religion for gentiles.
>
> (Alfred M. Lilienthal, *The Other Side of the Coin*)

Without the people who for centuries had been living with the belief in one God to lead them, the new Christians found it easiest to build their new religion's foundations, both literally and metaphorically, on those of the old, but obscuring and even denying them in the process. Thus, in a religion increasingly amputated from, and anathema to, the Jewish practices and beliefs of its founder, a god-man whose death promised everlasting life became a more meaningful and familiar figure than that of the original Jewish Messiah and Prophet. Also, without the structure of the Jewish faith, Christianity acquired an amorphous quality. At its best, intuition was its guide. However, aside from some rituals concerning the Last Supper, the founding fathers had to define a whole system of beliefs and practices, resulting in Christianity taking diverse forms the world over, absorbing beliefs and rituals wherever it is practised, and often seeming to do little more than cover polytheistic paganism with a monotheistic veneer. Yet this was the new Chosen People!

For the Jews, according to Lilienthal again, the adjective 'Chosen' changed: 'Their relationship to God was subordinated to their relationship to one another.'

However, a struggle over symbols and definitions was to be one of the hallmarks of the relationships between the two faiths. For Christians, Jesus was 'God with a body', an intermediary between God and man, which contrasts with the direct and intimate relationship of Judaism (and Islam for that matter). However, as Christianity in the West has declined and the life and message of Jesus have become less meaningful, for Christians (whether ex-, nominal or

practising) his co-religionists, the Jews themselves, have often come to be seen as the intermediaries. This is so particularly in their incarnation as secular Israelis: who resemble Westerners, but are nearer to God, whether theologically and/or geographically. There are many cultural, social, and psychological reasons why this is so, but it does seem that, as an American journalist says:

> What has happened since World War II is that the American sensibility itself has become part Jewish, perhaps nearly as much Jewish as anything else. (And) it goes right to the bone, all the way in.
>
> (Walter Kerr, in *The New York Times*, 14 Apr 1968, quoted in Ernest Van Den Haag, *The Jewish Mystique*)

What of Islam's Jesus? For Muslims, he is certainly special. Unlike all the other Prophets, excepting only Adam, his birth was miraculous. Unlike all the other Prophets, his heart at birth was pure and untouched by Satan. (The Prophet Muhammad's was purified when he was six.) Unlike the other Prophets before him he is a supra-historical figure. He came at a particular time, but left it before his death to await his return at the End of Days. In these ways, he is especially blessed to be a 'sign'. He is a sign who has been seen, but whose message, the destination, has been misread or rejected.

In Matthew, Jesus says: 'Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace but a sword.' (Matthew 10:34) It seems that he did. Much is made, by both Jews and Christians, of the role of the Jews in the development of human consciousness, our perception of right and wrong, and our sense of the oneness of God. In the light of the Holocaust there are understandable attempts to see Jews in as positive a light as possible; given Europe's history this is honourable, but it seems that we need to go still deeper. It could be argued—and I intend to—that the Jews, who are 'just like everyone else, only more so', were

indeed 'the Chosen people' precisely *because* of the stiff necks that even Moses chided them for. The refusal to submit was given dramatic life in the story of Jacob who wrestled with the man/angel/god/God at the river and was renamed *Israel*, in Hebrew, 'He who struggles with God.' And such was to be the role of the Children of Israel. To live through the logical consequences of this struggle. To be reminded and warned by their Prophets. (Though, as the Qur'an says, all nations have been sent prophets, none have had as many as the Children of Israel). To reject those Prophets. And to be expelled, not once, but twice, for doing so. But to survive. And bear witness. And yet still believe that they were, and are, right. Even the experience of profound unhappiness does not necessarily lead to insight or change, as the family of any alcoholic will confirm.

Yet before the second expulsion, they were given one last chance, which they rejected. The change that was needed was in their hearts, and they couldn't make it. As it was written that they *wouldn't* make it.

Thus, the path of *most* resistance, to the will of the Almighty, has been shown to be futile, even illusory, a message that was there for all humanity to read, if they chose to. So what was the alternative? At the time there was no explicitly universal one, though Christianity seemed, in some ways, to fit. The path of *least* resistance was instead to come from a descendant of Abraham's first son, Ishmael, rather than his second one, Isaac: the Qur'an says that this religion is the primordial one, the original religion of Adam, who had also had one occasion of disobedience. It is called *Islam*, submission to God, and it is also related to the word *Salam*, which means peace. Jesus was not the Prince of Peace, but he highlighted the choice.

The choice is between continuing to struggle against God and with submitting to Him; and here the sword that Jesus brought could remind us of the sword that Solomon brought to the child, implying that ultimately there is only one way to serve God, or even to believe in God. Accepting

that in many cases we have been travelling down the wrong path, or have even rejected the notion that there is a path, then requires repentance and a return to the primordial path. The repentance that is required to make the heart ready recalls a story whose image is familiar to Jews and Christians.

In the Jewish story, a king's son goes astray and sends word to his father that he has done too much and is too far gone ever to come back. But the father sends a reply saying: 'Come to me as far as you can, and I will come to meet you the rest of the way'.

The Christian story is the story that the New Testament records of the prodigal son, who takes his inheritance and squanders it. In choosing to take the riches of this world rather than to be patient and to serve he reminds us of the choice that Jesus did *not* take when Satan offered him dominion over all he surveyed when he withdrew to the Jericho wilderness after his baptism. The riches of the world are their own reward and are ultimately transient and, as the son sits in a foreign land, so hungry that he is tempted to eat the food that he is feeding to pigs, he thinks that his father's servants eat better than he, and he decides to return and beg forgiveness. As he approaches, his father sees him and runs to embrace him. The son tells him: 'Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son.' (Luke 15:21) The father, though, tells a servant to kill a fatted calf, and a celebration begins.

During the celebration, the older brother returns and he is angry that he had never enjoyed anything like such treatment. The father says to him: 'Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine. It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found.' (Luke 15:31–2) For Jesus, forgiveness is the free gift of God, involving no calculation of sin and punishment. And this is exactly the teaching of Judaism and Islam, where God forgives *bi-ghairi hisab*, 'without reckoning'. A sacrificial victim who is punished in full, giving 'full satisfaction' for the sins of

humanity, is the means by which a debt is paid off; but God, who is a God of compassion (*rahma*), makes no such calculations. Anyone who comes to God in sincere repentance will be forgiven. The punishment of an innocent entity, and the insistence on 'full satisfaction for sin' is abhorrent to the God of *rahma*.

As we read in the story of Ezekiel, God can restore a city, or the life of a living creature. Or even a nation. The son is restored by the forgiveness of his father. But as Primo Levi, a survivor of the Shoah, the Holocaust, would say many centuries later, for there to be forgiveness there first has to be repentance.