

Universalism, the Cross and the Crescent

"Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt." (Daniel 12:2)

Is it fair that those who have never even heard about Jesus Christ must spend eternity in hell? A haunting question for a Bible believing Christian. But in modern secular thought this question is no longer even entertained. The threat of a final judgment and eternal condemnation is considered medieval superstition not worthy of serious reflection. The idea of the righteous wrath of God and the finality of judgment is also absent in current neo-Protestant and liberal theology. Modern theology appears more interested in the affairs of this world than in the world-to-come. At the World Council of Churches' Fourth Assembly in Uppsala, Sweden (1968), it was stated in an official document: "Man is lost because he does not know who he is." This declaration is devoid of any reference to the wrath and judgment of a holy God. Modern theologians seem to have a vague but tenuous hope that God is too kind to punish. A good God would not allow anyone to be lost. All mankind will ultimately return to God. This is outright universalism; the teaching that everyone will be saved, the diabolic Hitler as well as the saintly Bernard Clairveaux. Another version of universalism is that all will be saved because of the merits of Christ. Christ died for all so that all will be saved. Unfortunately there appears to be a growing openness to universalism even among conservative Christians. In *The Banner* (August 24, 1987) as well as *Christian Today* (March 20, 1987) the issue of universalism was featured and discussed.

Does the Bible teach universalism? Will the Hindu as well as the Muslim be saved apart from faith in Jesus Christ? If all would be saved because God is good and merciful then Christ should never have died. His death on the cross would have been the greatest folly and error in history. But universalism is foreign to the Scriptures. Soren Kierkegaard saw hell as an overhanging threat and warned against the delusion that all will be finally saved. "Nowadays", he observed, "all of us expect to be saved – and Christ, who certainly is best informed says: Only few will be saved." Scriptures teach that there will be a great division at the end of times. The two-fold destiny of mankind is a constantly recurring theme throughout the New Testament. (Matthew 7:1, 2, 14; 25:46; John 3:18; Hebrews 2:3; Revelation 20:14, 15). Universalism is an insult to the cross, and to our Lord's authority. The coming of Christ to earth opens the door not only to heaven but also to hell, since those who reject the way of salvation are there confirmed in their sin. If universalism were true, the teachings of our Lord would be false. Our Lord taught the reality of hell; the great gulf fixed between the saved and the lost. He also plainly told that the majority of men are walking on the broad road that leads to everlasting destruction.

The Christian faith is still in direct confrontation with the religions of the world. As I studied and taught comparative religion, I often wondered if universalists have truly tried to understand the teachings of the major world religions. All religions are in conflict with

Christ. The cross is the sign and symbol of Christianity. And there is no greater cleavage between faith and unbelief than in the world religions' respective attitudes toward the cross. The fastest growing religion today is Islam. Yet its saddest feature is its repudiation of the Gospel of the cross.

The Qur'an rejects the Sonship of Jesus Christ. It emphasizes that Jesus never claimed to be a god or the son of God (Surah 5:72-75). The Muslims accept Jesus as the legitimate and major prophet of Allah. According to Muslim theologians the Old Testament prophecies are misinterpreted so as to apply to Jesus. In fact these prophecies refer to Muhammad. The advent of the prophet Muhammad, a descendant of Ishmael, is viewed as the fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham and Hagar (Genesis 21:13,18) And Isaiah 11:1, 2, "There shall come forth a shoot from the stem of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him", does not relate to Jesus but to Muhammad. The profile given in Isaiah 11 is of someone who will be a prophet, a statesman and a judge and is one of the descendants of "Jesse". Who is "Jesse"? A descendant of Ishmael. So the one who came from Ishmael's stem is none other than Muhammad. The spirit of truth foretold in John 16:12-13 is not the Holy Spirit but the coming of the prophet Muhammad. What John the Baptist was for Jesus, so is Jesus for Muhammad – a forerunner. Jesus' message was meant for a specific time and for a particular people – the Jews. He was not an universal messenger. And as God's messenger he did what previous prophets had done before him – to call men back to the one true religion, which is Islam. And Islam is the only religion which God will accept on the day of judgment. It is the only path of righteousness. The Qur'an says:

"Seek they other than the religion of Allah, when unto Him submitteth whosoever is in the heavens and the earth, willingly, or unwillingly, and unto Him they will be returned.

Say (O Muhammad): We believe in Allah and that which is revealed unto us and that which is revealed unto Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the tribes, and that which was vouchsafed unto Moses and Jesus and the Prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and unto Him we have surrendered. And whose seeketh as religion other than the Surrender (to Allah) it will not be accepted from him, and he will be a loser in the Hereafter."
(Surah 111, 83-85)

The mission which God entrusted to Jesus was not salvation through his sacrifice on the cross but salvation by virtue of right guidance and self-discipline.

Islam is natural man's effort to reach God. It teaches salvation by works. Those whose bad deeds exceed the good will have condemned themselves to the fires of hell. In the last judgment man's every action will be repaid in full. A Muslim scholar states: "We have the promise of Allah, the Merciful, that if we strive to do His will, He will reward our efforts." Muslims regard the crucifixion of Christ as a fable. The Qur'an says:

"And because of their saying: We slew the Messiah Jesus son of Mary, Allah's messenger - they slew him not nor crucified, but it appeared so unto them: and lo! those who disagree concerning it are in doubt thereof; they have no knowledge thereof save pursuit of a conjecture; they slew him not for certain."
(Surah iv, 157)

On the basis of this text, Muslim commentators have taught that Christ did not die on the cross. They suggest that either Judas Iscariot or Simon of Cyrene was substituted at the last moment. As for Jesus, God came to the rescue and saved him from his enemies.

Muslims see no need for the sin-bearing-death of Christ on the cross. They even believe that they give greater honour to Christ, and greater glory to God, BY DENYING THE POSSIBILITY OF THE CRUCIFIXION. "Each man shall reap the fruit of his own deeds." A Muslim scholar comments;

"Man is saved only through his good deeds and the grace of God. Nobody will carry my sins or your sins. It is against God's justice to sacrifice a pious individual for our sins, even when that individual is his own son. Why should he inflict injustice, especially on his own son for me and you? You probably will say because He loves us. Can't He save us and love us without doing injustice to somebody else?"

How can we say that all men shall be saved when the Muslims have put up such strong resistance to the central doctrine of the Scriptures, salvation through the shed blood of the Redeemer?

Not the Crescent, the symbol of Islam, but only through the cross of Christ God along with the empty tomb of the Gospel shall we be saved (1 Cor. 15:1-9).

Through the cross the character of God comes into full focus. The Cross brings division and healing. Hell as well as heaven is the outcome of Christ's crucifixion. Donald G. Bloesch writes: "Hell ... is essentially the creation of a loving God for those who refuse the help offered to them in Christ."

The holiness of God demands the punishment of sinners. "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23). On the cross our Lord took our justly deserved punishment on Himself. He did for us what we could not do for ourselves. This truth hurts our natural pride. Christ's death is suffering for others, suffering in their place. The Bible makes it abundantly clear that there is no salvation apart from Jesus Christ – either in this life or the life to come. Not Islam's path of righteousness, but the cross is the wisdom of God unto salvation (Romans 5:8). This message was foolishness to the Greeks, and continues to be for modern intellectuals and ordinary folk who trust in their own righteousness. But this Gospel is through which sinful men are brought to salvation (1 Cor. 1:18-25).

Universalism is man's invention. We may not like the Biblical teaching about hell, but honesty demands that we must treat it as an awesome reality. The very idea of hell is frightening. As Roger Nicole once wrote: "The thought of hell should bring tears to our eyes, and a compassionate desire to point out the only way to sure salvation. The lost will perish indeed. But Christ died to save the lost." Thank God that He still reaches out to rebellious man. He offers the way of redemption through the sacrifice of His Son.

Universalism kills any desire for mission. Why go out into all the world to preach the Gospel if all men are going to be saved anyway? But if there is a hell, we better reach out to the lost. As Christian messengers of the Gospel we may not be silent about the cross. Soren Kierkegaard rightly said: "Everybody who believes that there is a hell and that others go to hell is eo ipso a missionary, that is the least he can do."

The way to God is not the Crescent but the cross. Muslims are forever lost apart from Christ. Mission work among Muslims is extremely difficult. The labourers are few. Pray for the ministries of the Back to God Hour's Arabic broadcast, the Middle East Reformed Fellowship, and the Arab World Ministries (Formerly North African Mission). The Gospel must be brought, for tomorrow may be too late. "Now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:2).

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