

A Girardian reading of the Qu'ranic denial of the crucifixion

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Abstract

The Qu'ran states that, contrary to Christian doctrine, Jesus of Nazareth did not die on the cross, but was raised to heaven by God. Some XVIII Cent. European theologians have also suggested that Jesus may have survived the crucifixion. Christians have been in need of refuting the Qu'ran's denial of the crucifixion, but they lack the required archaeological and historical data to do so. However, the work of French thinker René Girard may be a useful tool to affirm the veracity of Jesus' crucifixion. Girard's anthropology suggests that stories that deny murders are in fact a way of covering our cultural origins.

Key words: Islam, Jesús, Qu'ran, René Girard.

Una lectura girardiana de la negación coránica de la crucifixión

Resumen

El Corán afirma que, contrario a la doctrina cristiana, Jesús de Nazaret no murió en la cruz, sino que Dios lo ascendió al cielo. Algunos teólogos europeos del siglo XVIII también han sugerido que Jesús pudo haber sobrevivido la crucifixión. Los cristianos siempre han estado en la necesidad de refutar la negación coránica de la crucifixión, pero carecen

de evidencia arqueológica e histórica para hacerlo. No obstante, la obra del francés René Girard podría ser una herramienta útil para afirmar la veracidad de la crucifixión de Jesús. La antropología de Girard sugiere que las historias que niegan asesinatos son en realidad una manera de encubrir nuestros orígenes culturales.

Palabras clave: Islam, Jesús, Corán, René Girard.

Islam is the non-Christian religious tradition that has the highest regards for Jesus of Nazareth. According to Islam, Jesus is a *rasul*, “he who brings a message from God” (Nasr, 2000: 34). It is said that, in the XXI Century, Muslims have a higher regard for Jesus than the so-called Christians of secular Western societies do.

Unlike a great number of Christians, most Muslims have absolutely no trouble in accepting Jesus’ virgin birth. Neither do they have trouble accepting Jesus’ capacity to perform miracles (1), and as a matter of fact, the Qu’ran acknowledges an additional miracles not recorded in the gospels (3:49).

Despite all these high regards for Jesus on the part of Muslims, he is also one of the main sources of differences between Christian and Islamic Doctrine. For Christian doctrine, Jesus is the second person of a divine trinity; thus, God has incarnated in him. Islam’s ultimate principle is *Tawhid*, or unity of God. God has no associates; thus, He can not incarnate in any shape. In such a manner, despite being a *rasul*, a prophet of outstanding conduct, Jesus is only considered to be a prophet, just as the Qu’ran attempts to make clear:

O People of the Book! Commit no excesses in your religion: Nor say of Allah aught but the truth. Christ Jesus the son of Mary was (no more than) a messenger of Allah, and His Word, which He bestowed on Mary, and a Spirit proceeding from Him: so believe in Allah and His messengers. Say not “Three (Trinity)” : desist: it will be better for you: for Allah is One God. Glory be to Him: (far exalted is He) above having a son. To Him belong all things in the heavens and on earth. And enough is Allah as a Disposer of affairs (4:171).

Jesus’ status (either as God or simply as a prophet) is not the only source of divergence between Christian and Islamic doctrine on this sub-

ject. There still remains the question of the veracity of Jesus' death and resurrection.

According to the gospels, Jesus was executed by Roman and Jewish authorities. He was sentenced to die on a cross, as it was customary at that time, and, after staying dead for three days, resurrected.

According to the Qu'ran, Jesus' crucifixion did not take place:

That they said (in boast), "We killed Christ Jesus the son of Mary, the Messenger of Allah.";- But they killed him not, nor crucified him, but so it was made to appear to them, and those who differ therein are full of doubts, with no (certain) knowledge, but only conjecture to follow, for of a surety they killed him not:- Nay, Allah raised him up unto Himself; and Allah is Exalted in Power, Wise;- (4:157-158)

Jesus was not crucified, but he gave the impression that he was. Before letting him die, God took Jesus up with Him. This is a rather odd passage from the Qu'ran, and it has been subject to different interpretations in Muslim theology. Christine Schirrmacher (1997) outlines three main interpretations that Muslim theology has offered for this account:

1. Nobody was crucified: A minority of Muslims follows this interpretation, suggesting that Jesus or anybody else was not crucified.
2. Another person was crucified instead of Jesus: Jesus appeared to be crucified, but it wasn't him. Someone else took his place, either because he was mistaken by the crowd, or because God intentionally made someone else look like Jesus. God took Jesus up to heaven, but everyone thought that Jesus had actually died. It is not clear who was Jesus' substitute, but accepting the claims of the gospel of Barnabas, it is thought that Judas died on the cross. This is the view that most Muslims adhere to.
3. Jesus was crucified but did not die: Jesus survived the crucifixion and was taken down alive from the cross. Crucifixion does not necessarily mean death.

Qu'ranic commentators have tried to build theological and doctrinal arguments as to why Jesus' death could not have taken place. On the one hand, Jesus' death constitutes a failure in his prophetic mission. If Jesus did die, it would mean that he was defeated, and his mission would not have been accomplished. We are certain that Jesus' mission

was *not* a failure, thus, he could not have been crucified. On the other hand, Jesus' crucifixion is a disgrace. According to the gospels, Jesus' death was shameful: he was gathered by common criminals and he suffered the worst punishment possible. Such a death is not worthy of one of God's prophets. God would not allow one of His messengers suffer such humiliation.

Modern Islamic scholars have supported their arguments with the works of some XVIII Cent. Western Christian rationalist critics that have suggested that Jesus did not die on the cross. Karl Friedrich Bahrdt (1999) suggested that Jesus survived the crucifixion and remained inside his grave for three days, and then met his disciples; Heinrich Eberhard Gottlob Paulus (1957) suggests that Jesus was taken down from the cross in an unconscious state, appearing to be dead, but actually survived the crucifixion; and Daniel Ernst Friedrich Schleiermacher (1975) also took this idea suggesting that Jesus' crucifixion did not necessarily mean brought about his death.

Christians have always felt the need to refute Islam's claim that Jesus did not die in the cross. It is virtually impossible to affirm or deny the veracity of Jesus' death: we lack the required historical and archeological data to do so. However, if we are to approach Jesus' death from a Christian perspective, and attempt refute the Qu'ranic claim, we may very well rely on the work of French thinker René Girard. He will not provide us with any historical or archaeological data. He just offers us an anthropology that will meet two of our basic needs to confirm the Christian position: by showing how culture functions, he can affirm the veracity of Jesus' death, and show on what grounds is Islam's denial of the crucifixion founded.

If René Girard is right, culture has its origins in the collective murder of a victim that functions as an emissary mechanism for humans to keep their tensions at ease. But, in order for culture to keep its stability, we must never find about its origins, for if we ever did, this emissary mechanism would not work.

Myths constitute the essential cultural feature that prevents us from understanding our origins. Overall, myths have two interrelated ways of preventing us from learning about the origins of culture:

1. The murder will be eventually erased from the mythical account, or
2. The victim will not appear as such. The murdered individual will not be profiled as a victim, but as monstrous undifferentiation that is *guilty* of all the troubles that abound in the community of lynchers.

Structuralist methods are very important for a Girardian understanding of myth. Myth is, above all, a process, myth is being continuously told and changed. Thus, myths must be evaluated synchronically as well as diachronically. The former will deal with the plot of the myth, whereas the latter will deal with its development over time. Girard realizes that, as myths evolve, the murder and the victim become invisible.

In such a manner, Girard (1987:106-109) invites us to evaluate the well-known Tikopia myth of Tikarau, as narrated by Rymond Firth in *Tikopia Ritual and Belief* (1967). In this account, Tikarau is chased up a hill to the edge of a cliff, but, being an *atau*, or god, escapes his pursuers by flying away.

The story of Tikopia is a typical narrative of a man being chased by a community of lynchers. But, unlike non-mythical sources, this myth insists on erasing the evidence of a murder. The myth denies that there has been a murder, indicating that the unfortunate Tikarau flew away and survived. This myth, as the rest of world mythology, is an unconscious attempt to prevent humanity from knowing the violent origins of culture. Echoing Gil Bailie's (1995) words, *except in myth, people don't just fly away*. Myth is fallacious in the sense that it tries to make us believe that there has been no founding murder. In such a manner, the Tikopia myth follows up the first way of covering up the origins: the denial of the murder.

To understand how myths try to erase the victim as such from the accounts, Girard invites us to evaluate another well-known myth: the Greek myth of Oedipus. The city of Thebes has been struck by a terrible plague. The oracle announces that the old king's murderer must be expelled in order for the city to regain its stability. Oedipus finds out that he has murdered king Laius, his own father, and has been married to his own mother. Thus, because of these terrible crimes, he is expelled from the city. Once he leaves the city, prosperity returns. There is no victim in this myth. Those who have committed parricide and incest are no victims; Oedipus is not a victim because, precisely, he is *guilty*. This myth prevents us from understanding that the whole stability and order of the city

have been built upon the collective expulsion of an individual. By not presenting Oedipus as what he really is (a victim of expulsion), myth assures the effectiveness of the emissary mechanism.

The Bible, on the other hand, is the total de-structuring of myth. Stories such as those of Cain and Abel, Joseph, Job, the Psalms, and most importantly, the Passion of Jesus, reveal the violent origins of culture. The Bible is the complete reversal of the two constant mythical features as we have outlined them: the murder and the victims appear as such. This is most definitely not a pretty sight, for we feel surely feel repugnance after finding out that human culture has been built upon murder. The Bible may appear to be insensitive and violent, because, unlike myth, does not attempt to hide the original murders. Nevertheless, it is much better to come to terms with the horrifying truth than to continue the murderous lie, we feel the joy of being wrong, as James Alison (1998) has described it; we discover our violent nature.

We must then keep this perspective in mind when trying to refute Islam's denial of Jesus' death. René Girard will not provide archaeological or historical data to attempt to prove that Jesus did in fact die on the cross. Girard will just provide us with an anthropology that may help explain why the Qu'ran states that Jesus did not die.

The story of the crucifixion of Jesus is, like the rest of world mythology, about a community of murderers that execute a victim. Whereas myth would either try to erase the evidence of such a murder or eliminate the presence of a victim by insisting on the guilt of the individual executed, the gospels both display the murder and deny the victim's guilt. According to the gospels, Jesus died on a cross and he was innocent of the crimes of which he was accused.

The Qu'ranic account of Jesus' death, as we have seen, is significantly different. However, we can not, by any means, affirm that the Qu'ranic account is 'mythical' in a Girardian sense. For Girard, myths operate under an overwhelming mimetic force. Myth writers imitate the violence of those executing the victim. The myth writer is overwhelmed by the mimetic force of the crowd, and he joins in, imitating the majority. He may not participate in the actual killing of the victim, but by failing to understand the victim's innocence and the whole emissary mechanism, when displaying the account of the myth, he becomes one more lyncher, and his narrative is shaped from the point of view of the lynching community.

This is not the case with the writers and/or editors of the Qu'ran. In the eyes of the Qu'ran, Jesus *is innocent*. Jesus is a *rasul*, a major prophet sent by God. *Rasuls* can commit no faults, therefore, they are innocent of any accusation laid upon them. Indeed, this is a major point of divergence between Muslims and Christians. According to Islamic scholars, the Bible must have been corrupted because, how could we explain that Moses and David, two of God's many messengers, did not lead full exemplary lives? In such a manner, the Qu'ran holds high regards for Jesus and holds up his innocence to the fullest extent.

Nevertheless, unlike the Bible, the Qu'ran is failing to complete the second great task we have just outlined: to show the murder for what it is. Jesus is taken up by God and is saved from violent death. We could almost affirm that Jesus, in the last minute before his death, *flies away*, just like Tikarau did when he was pushed off from the cliff. The Qu'ran refuses to accept that culture has its origins in a murder.

The Qu'ran shows a great power of sensibility and concern for the victim. Jesus is innocent, and this man is unjustly punished. By no means do the editors of the Qu'ran become overwhelmed by the mimetic sacrificial euphoria taking place: the editors stick with the victim. They hold his innocence and refuse to be a part of the crowd of lynchers.

It could even be argued that, in this instance, the God of the Qu'ran is much more peaceful than the God of the Bible. The God of the Bible is a violent and cruel deity that demands the bloody sacrifice of his most beloved son, whereas the God of the Qu'ran is a sensitive and merciful deity that rescues Jesus from a violent death.

Girard and Girardian theologians are severe critics of most Christian atonement theories that consider that God demanded the death of his son, Jesus. But, even if we were to consider that, indeed, the God of the Qu'ran appears to be much more merciful and sensitive, that is beyond the point. Unlike the Bible, the Qu'ran refuses to accept the horrifying fact that culture is built upon the collective murder of a victim. The Qu'ran is much more pleased to deny such a murder by claiming that God (indeed, a merciful and sensitive deity) saved the victim from dying. The Bible comes to terms with the horrifying truth, as unpleasant as it may be. The Qu'ran can not bear watch the bloody murder, and prefers to continue the mythological fallacy, thus remaining ignorant and naïve of man's nature.

In Matt, 11:6, Jesus proclaims: “And blessed is anyone who is not scandalized by me”.

The Qu’ran could not overcome the scandal that Jesus’ death constituted. The God of the Qu’ran is merciful and compassionate, just as Qu’ranic prefaces continuously affirm: “*Bismallah al-Rahman, al-Rahim*” (In the name of God, the Most Merciful and Compassionate). Indeed, God is on the side of the victims. But, the Qu’ran can not bear the idea of God *being* a victim. The Qu’ran can not even bear the idea of *rasuls* (messengers) being victims that suffer shameful executions.

Jesus’ death reveals not an angry and violent God, but the anthropological truth about our cultural origins. By showing Jesus’ death for what it is, the Bible reveals that the victims of collective executions are innocent and unfolds the mythological lie that has been kept hidden prior to the Christian revelation.

Whether or not Jesus died on the cross, we can not tell. In my opinion, it doesn’t really matter. For all I know, the XVIII Century scholars could be right in asserting that Jesus survived his crucifixion. What *does* matter is the anthropological significance of this event: by accepting that Jesus died, we come to terms with the eerie truth of our cultural origins and can work peace and love departing from that point; by accepting the story that he flew away before dying, we refuse to accept such a truth and remain dangerously naïve about the human condition.

This being left aside, I still believe that Jesus *did* die on the cross. And, to support such a claim, I recur to Girard’s work once again. Great theorists of myth, such as Claude Levi-Strauss (1967) and Mircea Eliade (2000) have been a very important source for Girard’s understanding of mythology. For Levi-Strauss, mythological accounts can be traced back to a tendency in the universal human mind to oppose sets of binary pairs. For Eliade, mythological accounts are the “*homo religiosus*” phenomenological effort to go back to the cosmic origins. While the insights of these thinkers are very admirable, they fail to understand that mythology has a connection with a reality. For Levi-Strauss, myth is just an operational aspect of the human mind, not necessarily guarding any relationship with reality. For Eliade, myth is a reality, but this reality takes place on a purely phenomenological level. In contrast, for Girard, myths refer to *real stories that did in fact take place.*

Girard wonders why do myths insist so much in covering up the original murder. Why doesn't the Tikopia myth tell us that Tikarau just fell from the cliff and died? "Why would one constantly encounter the perspective of the lynchers if there were no lynchers to provoke it?" (Girard, 1987:118).

Myths try to cover up the murder because this murder has in fact taken place. When a child all of a sudden insists that he has done nothing wrong, we begin to think that he in fact *has* done something wrong. Something similar takes place in mythology. If myths insist so much that there has been no murder, it's because there has probably been a real one. Most likely, Tikarau, as well as Oedipus, were real characters murdered and expelled respectively. In such a manner, we have every reason to believe that if Islam energetically denies the veracity of Jesus' crucifixion, it is because in fact Jesus *was* crucified.

Thus, we are not truly in a comfortable position to historically prove that Jesus did die on the cross. We are much better off deconstructing the Qu'ran's denial of the crucifixion by understanding how such denials (found through out world mythology) operate, and how they in fact bear no resemblance with historical reality.

This is not to say that Islam is not filled with wisdom and knowledge. Our critical approach to Islam is done with the highest of regards in the light of a constructive dialogue that may help us come closer to our Muslim brothers, yet with such an approach, clarify our differences.

Note

1. See the Qu'ran, 3:46, 3:49, 5:110.

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