

Unveiling

Presenting Jesus to Muslims Through a Confessional Recitation

Martin Parsons

*Editor's note: this article is excerpted from **Unveiling God: Contextualizing Christology for Islamic Culture** (William Carey Library, 2005). To obtain a copy of this book and to learn the framework behind the confessional recitation reproduced here, go to www.missionbooks.org.*

A christology must have a concrete form if it is to become meaningful communication. There are many forms through which christology might be expressed. These include creeds, hymnody, theological curricula, church sermon series, chronological Bible storytelling, drama and poetry. Discussion of the merits of particular forms is beyond the scope of this study.

However, it is important to note that the contextualised christology must be expressed in a form which is both accessible to, and transmittable by, a wide spectrum of people within the community, not simply those who have either studied theology or are significantly more educated than the majority. In a culture where communication is primarily oral, the christology must be expressed in a form that is capable of oral transmission if it is to become part of the church's expression of its faith.

Although limitations of space prevent us illustrating the shape this christology might take in a diversity of forms, we will here give one concrete example of how this christology might be expressed. This first is in the form of a confessional recitation.

Example: A Confessional Recitation

In order to facilitate oral learning and transmission, the confessional recitation is divided into a number of cantos and has a largely narrative and versified structure. This study can only point towards the ultimate form that this structure and versification might take in any given culture.

Martin Parsons, Ph.D., is a British academic. He has spent a number of years in two Islamic countries, where he was involved in assisting the local church.

However, it is important that a form of versification be adopted which is accessible to the widest spectrum of the population, rather than necessarily following the style and conventions of classical poetry. The discourse structures that typically characterise oral literature will require this confessional recitation to use a far greater degree of repetition than the written texts that predominate in the West. Indeed, a large body of scholarship suggests that repetition is the key feature of oral literature.

This use of narrative and repetition will inevitably make this expression of christology significantly longer than the more systematic expressions of theology appropriate to other contexts. However, these features of oral discourse will facilitate a greater comprehensibility of theology in many non-western contexts. Indeed, it is precisely the concise expressions of systematic theology that non-western theologians have criticised as being too abstract to be easily comprehensible in the non-western world.

First Canto

There is but one God
Whom alone we worship
The Creator (*al-Khaliq*) of all things
The Lord of all things (*Rabb kull shay*)
The Master of the Day of Judgement (*Malik Yaum al-din*)
And the only Saviour.
Heaven, even the highest heaven cannot contain Him,

الرَّحْمَنُ

Yet He manifested His presence on the throne of heaven, when He unveiled visions of Himself to the prophets Isaiah, Ezekiel and Daniel, who saw Him surrounded by His angels high above all else.

He walked in the garden with Adam and Eve, before He banished mankind from His presence on account of their sin.

But He veiled His glory and appeared on earth to Abraham, announcing his covenant and the gift of a son.

And He appeared on earth to Moses at the burning bush and on the Mount, when He revealed that He was the Saviour who would rescue His people from Egypt, and revealed the name YHWH expressing this revelation of His identity as the Saviour.

الْحَكِيمُ

He veiled Himself in the cloud and went before His people to rescue them from Egypt. Not an angel, nor an

ambassador, but He Himself became their Saviour.

The prophets foretold that He would come to earth again, as Saviour and Judge. They told of the blind seeing, the deaf hearing, the dumb speaking and lame walking, when God Himself came to earth.

Isaiah spoke of a child to be born, Who would be called 'Mighty God'.

Malachi foretold how God would send His messenger to prepare the way, before He Himself would come to earth.

Yahya ibn Zakariya was that messenger who prepared the way for God's own coming, calling all to

repent, for the kingdom of God was at hand.

For all the law and the prophets were only until Yahya.

For all the law and the prophets spoke of the coming of al-Masih, Who came to earth to rescue men and women from obedience to Satan and restore them to the rule of God their King.

And when He came to earth, by His own authority He healed the blind and lepers, brought the dead to life; the dumb spoke, the deaf heard and demons left the afflicted.

He also gave this authority to His disciples, in His name to heal the sick and over all the powers of darkness.

And yet when He the Creator (*al-Khaliq*) God came to earth, men and women –

His own creatures refused to receive Him hospitably, and brought shame, guilt and dishonour on the family of man by working with Satan to crucify Him.

But by His death on the cross, He defeated Satan and demons, He dealt with our sin that had separated us from God. He alone could forgive us our sins, for it was Him we had sinned against.

He fulfilled all that the prophets had spoken, as they prophesied the sufferings of al-Masih and the glories to follow.

Therefore He was raised back to life, for death could not hold Him, and He was exalted back to the very throne of God in heaven.

From there He poured out the very Spirit of God on those who submitted to his kingly rule in their lives.

'A Most Valuable Contribution'

Muslim responses to Christianity down the ages have been shaped by diverse factors. One of the primary stumbling blocks has been Muslim misperceptions of Christian core beliefs about the person of Jesus and the nature of God.

In this study, Martin Parsons seeks to present Jesus to Muslims in a way which is harmonised with Muslim cultural realities. He argues that previous attempts by Christian scholars to do so have been typically based on a misreading by the Christians concerned of what would be understandable to a Muslim audience. Parsons proposes instead an approach which draws heavily on that used by early Christian writers in presenting Jesus to Jewish

audiences. This study includes a practical example of contextualisation which should provide great insights to Christians who are trying to explain their faith to Muslims in diverse contexts.

The study thus makes a most valuable contribution to the task of seeking greater understanding between Christians and Muslims. In a context of increased tension between the West and Islam in the early 21st century, such a skilful and insightful study should be warmly welcomed by Christians and Muslims alike.

Peter G. Riddell

*Professor of Islamics and Director,
Centre for Muslim-Christian Relations,
London School of Theology*

There the angels and all the host of heaven worship Him, declaring that He is worthy to receive honour and glory and praise, for with His blood He re-deemed men from every tribe and language, people and nation to worship God.

From there 'Isa will come again in glory on the Last Day (*Yaum al-akhir*), accompanied by His angels to take those in His kingdom to the place prepared for them in heaven.

On that day He alone will sit as Judge, the Master of the Day of Judgement (*Malik Yaum al-din*). He will burn in the lake of fire those who rejected His kingship, along with Satan and his demons.

But those in His kingdom will see His face, they will serve day and night before His throne. Never again will they hunger, never again will they thirst, the sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

Behold, He is coming soon!

This is our God, the only true God.

We worship Him alone.

Second Canto

He alone is the one Creator (*al-Khaliq*) of all things, The Father who dwells in unapproachable light is the source of creation from whom all things came.

From all eternity 'Isa, the visible form of the invisible God, was with God, and was God. All things were created through Him, without Him nothing was made that has been made.

He is the Creator (*al-Khaliq*), the Maker (*al-Bari*), the Fashioner (*al-Musawwir*) and the Beginner (*al-Mubdi*) of all things. We are His creatures.

He is the one Creator God, the Self-subsisting One (*al-Qayum*) who alone has life in Himself, and has imparted life to His creation through His Spirit, who alone is the Quickener (*al-Muhyi*), the giver of life.

This is our God, the only true God.

We worship Him alone.

Third Canto

He alone is Ruler of all things (*Rabb kull shay*), the Lord of the worlds (*Rabb al-alam*), the King of kings (*Malik al-mulk*) and Lord of lords, who created all things and rules all things.

When Satan and his demons rebelled against God, they were thrown out of heaven down to earth, where they seek to deceive the children of men, bringing rebellion, death and destruction with them.

Therefore the Father, Who dwells in unapproachable light, put all things under 'Isa, the visible form of the invisible God, in order that He may reign as Lord over all creation until He has put all the powers of darkness beneath His feet. He is the Lord

of all things (*Rabb kull shay*), to whom all creatures must submit.

He defeated the proud rebellion of Satan, by laying aside His heavenly glory, clothing Himself, the visible form of the invisible God, with humble human nature, becoming a man as we are. And being found in appearance as a man,

He defeated Satan's proud rebellion by humbling Himself to the point of death on the cross, where He disarmed Satan and all the powers of darkness, triumphing over them, redeeming men and women from their bondage to Satan's kingdom.

Therefore, He was raised from the dead, and not only raised, but also exalted back to the highest place in heaven, that every knee in heaven and earth should bow before Him, and confess that He is Lord of lords and King of kings (*Malik al-mulk*).

From heaven He has sent the Spirit of God to His church, that through His church, His kingdom might spread throughout the earth, among every tribe, language, people and nation that His death redeemed for God.

He will then come once more to earth as Judge. He will finally destroy all the powers of darkness that have rebelled against God.

When He has finally destroyed all rebellion against God, 'Isa, the visible form of the invisible God, will hand the kingdom back to the Father Who dwells in unapproachable light, and sit with Him on His throne, the one Lord of the one throne (*Rabb al-'arsh*).

There will be no more suffering, no more sickness, no more sin.

For God's rule will reign unchallenged in all things from the one throne in heaven of the one God,

This is our God, the only true God,

We worship Him alone.

Fourth Canto

He alone is the Saviour,

He alone can forgive us our sins, for it is He that we have sinned against.

No-one else could save us from our sin.

He is the Ruler and King of all things. All creatures, whether angels or men, owe Him perfect, absolute and undivided obedience.

No mere man could redeem the life of another, or give to God a ransom for him.

Even the most perfect of His creatures could have no surplus merit to pay the debt of another.

Only God Himself could pay the debt we owe, only He could save us.

He, *al-Azim* became the momentous (*azim*) sacrifice

الْعَدْلُ

promised to Abraham, the only sacrifice that could ransom us.

He the Compassionate (*al-Rahim*) and the Merciful (*al-Rahman*) became our Saviour.

The Father who dwells in unapproachable light, *al-Batin*, whom no-one has seen or can see, sent 'Isa, the visible form of the invisible God, to save us from our sins and reconcile us to Himself.

He added human nature to Himself; the immortal visible form of God clothed Himself with mortal flesh like ours, and became a man. Man could not be united with God, only God could unite Himself with man.

As a nightingale suffers thorns and bloodshed to reach the rose it loves, so God our Saviour laid aside His heavenly glory and humbled Himself, suffered thorns and bloodshed to save us. Out of His great love, He endured the cross for us to free us from the powers of evil, sin and death and reconcile us to Himself.

By His death and resurrection He paid the penalty for our sin, only He could do it.

He freed us from the power of sin and death, delivered us from the kingdom of Satan, and transferred us to His own glorious kingdom.

This was solely an act of His grace. We did not earn it, we could not earn it.

Therefore He was exalted back to the highest place in heaven. Now all the host of heaven worship Him because He is the Lamb who was slain to purchase men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.

Because 'Isa did this the Father saves all who repent of their sins and believe in Him, making them alive with new spiritual birth.

And 'Isa, the Lord of the water of life (*ab-i-bayat*), has poured out the Spirit of God, the Giver of life (*al-Muhyi*) on those who repent, making them alive with new spiritual birth and renewing them.

We who were formerly spiritually dead in our sins, He has made alive, and by His Spirit united us (*wasl*) to Him.

When He Himself acted to save us from our sin, He revealed that He, Father, Messiah and Holy Spirit, was the Saviour of all men. And so He has revealed to us His great name (*Ism al-azim*), 'the name of the Father, the Messiah and the Holy Spirit'.

This is our God, the only true God, the only Saviour. We worship Him alone.

Fifth Canto

He alone is the final Judge. Every creature in heaven and on earth must appear before Him.

The Father who dwells in unapproachable light has

given all judgement to 'Isa, the visible form of God, Who became man.

He is the Master of the Day of Judgement (*Malik Yaum al-din*), the Judge of judges (*al-Hakim al-hakimin*), all things will be judged by Him.

He is the Just One (*al-'Adl*) who will judge with perfect righteousness and justice.

He has sent the Spirit of God, *al-Wakil*, into the world to convict men and women of sin, righteousness and judgement.

Those who refuse to follow Him, who refuse to repent and accept His sacrifice for their sin, He will throw into the lake of fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

But those who repent of their sins and follow Him, He will welcome into the very presence of God in heaven. His perfect sacrifice has cleansed them from their sin.

They shall dwell with God.

They will be His people,

And God will wipe every tear from their eye, there will be no more death, or mourning, or crying or pain.

For God will make everything new.

Sixth Canto

There is but One God,

Who alone we worship.

We know Him as Father, *al-Batin*, who dwells in unapproachable light,

Yet tenderly cares for us, planned our creation and salvation.

We know Him as 'Isa, the visible form of the invisible God,

Who created, rules and will judge all things, and became our Saviour.

And we know Him as the Holy Spirit,

Who breathed life into creation,

is the all-seeing presence of God throughout creation,

Who inspired the prophets,

convicts the world of sin,

and whose presence unites us with God,

sanctifying our sinful hearts and empowering us to serve Him.

This is the one God we worship.

He alone is the Creator (*al-Khaliq*) of all things,

Lord of all things (*Rabb kull shay*),

Master of the Day of Judgement (*Malik Yaum al-din*),

And the only Saviour.