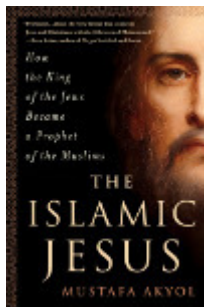


Muslim writer explores current relevance of Jesus' message for Islam



Mustafa Akyol

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**THE ISLAMIC JESUS: HOW THE KING OF THE JEWS BECAME A
PROPHET OF THE MUSLIMS**

By Mustafa Akyol

Published by St. Martin's Press, 288 pages, \$26.99

Does Jesus have something important to say to today's Muslims? *The Islamic Jesus* says yes, but not in a way most readers might assume. The question may sound like a Christian appeal to evangelize Muslims, but author Mustafa Akyol is a believing Muslim whose book shows no

intention of wanting to convert anyone. Instead, most of it details the history of a little-known branch of early Christianity and how he says it influenced the later religion of Islam. It's in the last chapter, titled "What Jesus Can Teach Muslims Today," that Akyol leaps over the centuries to present some provocative ideas about how that historical link can help the present-day Muslim world.

But fast-forwarding to the last chapter would mean missing the investigation that took him there. It all started several years ago when Akyol, a columnist for Turkey's *Hürriyet Daily News* and an op-ed contributor to *The New York Times*, was handed a New Testament by a Christian missionary on a busy street in his native Istanbul.

Out of curiosity, he read it through, underlining passages he didn't agree with in red and ones he liked in blue. When he got to the Epistle of St. James, all his underlining was in blue. Nowhere did James say that Jesus was divine. He read these passages to his Quran study group and his friends there agreed. It was like the Islamic Jesus — not the Son of God but a great prophet nonetheless.

The more he read, especially in the numerous historical studies of early Christianity that he recounts in his book, the more Akyol saw a link between St. James and the view of Jesus that appears in the Quran. As head of the early Christian group in Jerusalem, James kept the Jewish law and saw Jesus as the Messiah.

St. Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, saw Jesus as the Son of God who freed Christians from following the Jewish law as the Pharisees did. When the Council of Jerusalem met to decide whether converts had to become Jews first, which meant circumcision for the men, Paul won out and his view of Christianity eventually became the dominant one.

James' group, which became known as Jewish Christians, gradually dispersed after the destruction of the Temple. Some of them went to Arabia, bringing with them their belief — later denounced as a heresy — that Jesus was a miracle-working prophet born of a virgin but not divine.

The Quran presents Jesus as a prophet second only to Mohammad. Islam's holy book recounts episodes from his life, including stories from apocryphal writings not included in the Bible, but does not spell out his teachings in detail.

This is where Akyol, with the help of two modern writers, makes his leap to the 21st century. The first was the Iranian-American author Reza Aslan, whose 2013 book *Zealot* portrayed Jesus as a Jewish rebel against Roman rule rather than a religious reformer.

"That's not the Jesus that I and other Muslims believe in," Akyol told *NCR* by Skype from Wellesley College in Massachusetts, where he is a senior visiting fellow at the Freedom Project. "We believe in a Jesus who is not divine but still was sacred and brought a message of faith."



A 16th-century Ottoman miniature, now in the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts in Istanbul, shows the ascension of Jesus. (Newscom/Universal Images Group/Leemage)

The second author was the British historian Arnold Toynbee, who in a 1948 essay drew a parallel between the Jews of Jesus' time and Muslims in his day. Under pressure from the Roman Empire, he said, the Jews divided into "Herodians" who conformed with the superior power and "zealots" who clung to their religion and rebelled against the outsiders.

The modern-day Herodians were the secular rulers of the Arab world, Toynbee said, while the modern zealots were Saudi Wahhabis. Akyol expanded the parallel, saying today's zealots would include Salafis and jihadis.

The Sadducees of 2,000 years ago were the conformist Islamic institutions of today, he continued, and the Pharisees were the Islamists devoted to upholding the Shariah.

What is missing, he argues, is the message Jesus preached about the kingdom of God. It was not a political institution or a theocracy, but a spiritual kingdom. Translated to present-day Islam, this would mean that Muslims need not strive to found a caliphate because, as he puts it, "the caliphate is within you."

He drew a similar lesson from Jesus' message to focus on the spirit of the Halakha, the Jewish law, rather than just its letter. "The way forward for Muslims is to understand that just like the Halakha, the Shariah is made for man — and women, of course — and not the other way around," he writes.

For skeptics who question whether Muslim theologians would be open to this approach, Akyol notes that Islamic tradition includes thinkers such as Abu Ishaq al-Shatibi. This 14th-century Andalusian scholar stressed following the *maqasid*, or intentions, of Islamic law more flexibly, an approach favored by some modern Islamists like those in Tunisia.

Indiana University Professor Asma Afsaruddin, who has read the book, noted that the 2007 "Common Word" manifesto, which has been signed by over 400 Muslim scholars, has

already highlighted how much common ground Christianity and Islam have. “Akyol’s book may be regarded as building on this insight already accepted by mainstream Muslim thinkers in the Islamic world,” she told *NCR* in an email.

Akyol said he didn’t have the final chapter in mind when he started the book, but it ends with a striking message for Christians, Muslims and Jews.

“As Muslims, who are latecomers to this scene, we have disagreements with both Jews and Christians,” he writes in the book’s final paragraph. “But we have major agreements as well. With Jews, we agree a lot on God. With Christians, we agree that Jesus was born of a virgin, that he was the Messiah, and that he is the Word of God. Surely, we do not worship Jesus, like Christians do. Yet still, we can follow him. In fact, given our grim malaise and his shining wisdom, we need to follow him.”

[Tom Heneghan is the Paris correspondent for the London-based weekly Catholic magazine *The Tablet*.]