



The Message of Islam and the Gospel of Jesus Christ

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Questions about relations between Muslims and Christians continue to receive widespread attention in the media and society at large. In particular, the question, “Do Christians and Muslims worship the same God?” has become especially controversial among Christians in the United States. Responses have often been polarizing, with one side insisting the answer must be affirmative and the other vehemently denying this. But the question itself is highly ambiguous and it conflates different issues in an unhelpful manner. Thus, rather than trying to answer directly whether Christians and Muslims worship the same God, it is more helpful to consider similarities and differences in the beliefs of Muslims and Christians, noting both areas of agreement and disagreement.

There are some clear similarities between beliefs of Christians and Muslims. For example, both Islam and Christianity are monotheistic religions that maintain that the universe was created by God, that God has given humankind a special revelation, and that there will be a final judgment. But there are fundamental differences as well—differences that take us to the heart of the Christian gospel and the New Testament teachings about Jesus Christ. What follows is a very concise introduction to some aspects of Islam and Christianity which focuses upon several significant points in which the Christian gospel is different from what Islam traditionally has maintained. Highlighting differences in this manner should not be taken as minimizing important similarities between the religions. But the differences in belief concern the core of the gospel, so appreciation of similarities must be framed with awareness of basic differences.

Islam Overview

Islam emerged in the seventh century in what is today Saudi Arabia. The traditional account maintains that God revealed his will to Muhammad (AD 570?-632) in a series of revelations dictated by the angel Gabriel over roughly twenty years. These revelations, codified and put into writing after the death of Muhammad, comprise the Qur’an, accepted by Muslims as the Word of God. The Qur’an is said to be the definitive revelation from God, the culmination of earlier revelations to numerous prophets, including to Jews and Christians (called “People of the Book” in the Qur’an). Muhammad is said to be the last and greatest of the prophets.

Initially persecuted in Mecca, Muhammad moved to Medina and established there a theocratic society that has served as a model for later Muslim communities. Muslims quickly conquered surrounding areas, so that within a century of the Prophet’s death Muslims could be found not only throughout the Arabian Peninsula but also in southern France, Spain, North Africa, central Asia and even in western China. Islam is today a genuinely global religion, with an estimated 1.7 billion Muslims worldwide compared with roughly 2.4 billion Christians.¹ Most Muslims live in Asia and Africa, with more than 50 per cent of the world’s Muslims living in Indonesia, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nigeria, Iran, Turkey, and Egypt.

The major division within Islam is between Shi’ite and Sunni Muslims. Although there are some doctrinal differences between the branches, the division stems from violent struggles early on over the legitimate successor to Muhammad. About 85 per cent of Muslims today are Sunni and roughly 15 per cent are Shi’ite. Islam today faces significant internal tensions as various factions struggle to define what it means to be Muslim in the twenty-first century. In addition to the tensions between Shi’ites and Sunnis, there are divisions between traditionalists (who resist accommodations to modernity) and progressives (who maintain that Islam is fully compatible with modern, democratic societies) as well as between various ethnic groups. Since the 1980s radical Islamist movements have adopted global terrorism to promote their agendas.

Muslims are united in their belief in one God, the Qur’an as God’s revelation, and Muhammad as God’s final prophet. They find unity of practice in the Five Pillars: The shahadah, or declaration of faith (“There is no God but God and Muhammad is the messenger of God”); prayer five times daily; almsgiving; the fast of Ramadan; and, if possible, pilgrimage to Mecca.

Islam and the Christian Gospel

Both Muslims and Christians affirm that there is one God who is the creator of everything that exists (apart from God himself). But although Muslims and Christians

¹ “Status of Global Christianity, 2015, in the Context of 1900-2050,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 39:1 (January 2015): 29.

agree to some extent on some of the divine attributes, they also have fundamental disagreements over the nature of God and what God expects from humankind. For example, Muslims regard God as sovereign, merciful, and benevolent, but they generally do not think of God as loving in the way that the Bible speaks of the love of God. The Bible declares that “God is love” (1 Jn 4:8, 16), and it is because of God’s love for the world that God’s Son was sent to be an atoning sacrifice for our sins (Jn 3:16; 1 Jn 4:10). In turn, Christians are commanded to love God with their entire being, to love their neighbor (Mt. 22:34-40), and even to love their enemies (Mt. 5:43-47). The Qur’an, by contrast, never identifies God with love, nor does it command us to love God. Many Muslims would hold that talk of God as love compromises his sovereignty, “humanizes” God and distorts what is transcendent. Christians maintain that although God is transcendent and sovereign he is also personal and loving.

Both Christians and Muslims believe God has given a special revelation to humankind but they disagree over the nature of this revelation. Muslims believe that God has revealed his will to various prophets in the past, including to the Hebrew prophets and to Jesus, but that the Old and New Testaments of the Christian Bible have been corrupted and thus are not authoritative. The Qur’an is the definitive and final revelation. Muslims insist that Muhammad was not the author of the Qur’an; he is said to have been the passive recipient of revelations dictated to him.

Christians, by contrast, hold that God has revealed himself progressively in the Old and New Testaments, comprising the Bible. Christians believe that each book of the Bible is simultaneously the product of God and the human author. Although God superintended the process, so that what was written is what God intends, the distinctives of the human authors were allowed to shine through. Thus, although the product itself is veritably God’s God-breathed word, it is delivered through human authors. Christians believe that the Old and New Testaments are the complete special revelation of God and that no other writings are to be added to the canon of holy scripture. The last of the New Testament writings was completed by the end of the first century, over five centuries before Muhammad is said to have received revelations from God. There is simply no historical or textual evidence to support the claim that the Bible accepted by Christians is a corruption of an earlier revelation from God that is consistent with the Qur’anic teachings.

The New Testament itself points to the incarnation in Jesus Christ as the apex of God’s self-revelation (Jn 1:1-18; Heb. 1:1-3). And it is at this point that differences between Islam and the Christian gospel become most pronounced. For Islam traditionally has denied the doctrine of the incarnation and the holy Trinity. This is not a minor disagreement, as the biblical teaching on the deity of Jesus Christ is central to the message of the gospel.

It is true that Jesus is given a prominent place in the Qur’an. He is called the Messiah, Son of Mary, Messenger, Prophet, Servant, Word, and Spirit of God. Jesus is always spoken of in the Qur’an with reverence. The virgin conception of Jesus is indicated in Surahs 3:45-48 and 19:18-22 of the Qur’an. But the Qur’an omits Jesus’ teachings and it rejects the suggestion that Jesus is divine. For example, Jesus is portrayed as explicitly denying that he is to be identified with God (5:109-119). Particularly offensive to Muslims is the title “Son of God”. There can be little doubt that Muhammad understood this title to imply the physical generation of the alleged Son from the Father, an implication he detested (23:90-93; cf. 112). There are also in the Qur’an numerous denunciations of what were taken to be the Christian teaching on the Trinity (cf. 4:171; 9:30-31). The Qur’an seems to assume that Christians believe that the Trinity consists of God the Father, the Virgin Mary, and their child—Jesus. This, of course, is not what the Bible teaches nor what the orthodox Christian community has affirmed in the doctrine of the Trinity.

The death of Jesus Christ on the cross, followed by his glorious resurrection, is at the heart of the Christian message. The gospel is the good news that Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word and Son of God, is Savior and Lord and that through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus we have forgiveness and redemption from sin, new life through the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit, and reconciliation with God. There is no gospel without the cross, for it is through Jesus’ atoning death on behalf of sinful human beings that justification and reconciliation with God are possible.

But it may come as a surprise to Christians to learn that most Muslims believe that Jesus did not die on the cross. Surah 4:155-159 has been taken by many Muslims as claiming that although the Jewish leaders tried to kill Jesus they “did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but they thought they did.”² For Muslims it is unthinkable that God would allow Jesus, God’s anointed prophet, to be crucified. As Kenneth Cragg observes, “The event which is the very fount and heart of Christianity is held by Muslims to be unhistorical and incredible.”³ There is in Islam no need for something like Christ’s atoning death, for each person is responsible for his or her own actions (36:54; 53:38; 82:19). Sin, within Islam, is not a matter of the total depravity of human nature but more a weakness, defect, or flaw in human character (cf. 4:28; 30:54; 7:19-25).

Disciples of Jesus Christ In A Religiously Diverse World

Christians in the West are part of a world that is becoming more tightly interconnected on many levels. American society is itself becoming increasingly diverse. Divisions and tensions over ethnic, cultural, ethical and religious matters often drive further polarization among various groups. How should Christians respond to Muslims and adherents of other religions in American society? The importance of affirming

² *The Koran*, Trans. N. J. Dawood (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1974) p. 382.

³ Kenneth Cragg, *Jesus And The Muslim* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1999) p. 166.

both similarities and differences in beliefs and practices between Muslims and Christians has already been noted. The differences are real and are significant. Nevertheless, even as differences are acknowledged Christians should also recognize the importance of cultivating healthy relationships with Muslims and seeking together the common good.

First, as disciples of Jesus Christ, Christians are to be good citizens (Mt. 22:15-22; Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Pet. 2:13-17). There are roughly 3.3 million Muslims in the United States (compared with 5.7 million Jews and 2.1 million Hindus)⁴ and Muslims serve in the U.S. military, in local, state, and federal government positions, and are active throughout the business, medical and educational communities. American Muslims, like all citizens, are guaranteed freedom of religious belief and practice by the U.S. Constitution. American Christians should welcome American Muslims as fellow citizens and should work to establish relationships with Muslims at work, at school and in the community. Where Muslims and Christians share common interests they should work together for the common good.

Moreover, Jesus' disciples are to love their neighbors (Mt. 22:34-40), and in American society today this includes Muslims. Loving others includes seeking the well-being of the other and acting in ways that promote the good of the other. Christians are to treat others, including Muslims, the way that they would wish to be treated by others (Mt. 7:12).

Finally, Christians are to make disciples of all peoples (Mt. 28:18-20), and this includes Muslims. In faithfulness to the Lord Jesus, Christians must share the gospel with their Muslim neighbors, clarifying misconceptions they might have of the gospel and urging them to accept Jesus, the Son of God, as Lord and Savior. Given centuries of mutual suspicion and misunderstandings and the current tensions, doing so in a winsome and responsible manner will not be easy. But this is the challenge facing American Christians in the days ahead: to be appropriately accepting and welcoming of Muslims as neighbors while also encouraging them to become disciples of Jesus Christ. The Christian obligation and privilege to love one's neighbor does not depend on Christians agreeing with Hindus or Muslims about their respective understandings of God, or even with Buddhists or atheists who deny God's reality. Differences of understanding are real and profound. But the obligation to love one's neighbor springs from the fact that all human beings are made in the image of God, and from the command and example of the Lord Jesus himself.

⁴ Besheer Mohamed, "A New Estimate of the U.S. Muslim Population", *PewResearchCenter*, January 6, 2016, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/01/06/a-new-estimate-of-the-u-s-muslim-population/>.

Further reading

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