

MUSLIMS CALL CHRISTIANS “PEOPLE OF THE BOOK”

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The Qur’an and the Bible provide plenty of proof texts on which meaningful dialogue between Islam and Christianity could take place. Muslims call Christians “People of the Book” because of their allegiance to the Bible. What do Christians say about Muslims? Do they know who Muslims are?

This article is intended to present the main teachings of Islam succinctly. It also presents a framework by which Christians and Muslims can enter into meaningful dialogue by stating both similarities and areas of tension and difficulties. As Paul Martinson says, “To get to know the other, as well as the self, in this ‘vast world of sensible and spiritual objects,’ it is required that one know the order of one’s own and the other’s loves and hates” (Martinson, p. 16). With great care and respect, the origins and the belief system of Islam will be presented, and a Christian alternative will be offered at the end. This is also an attempt to give Christian readers a resource that would help them to understand a Muslim friend or neighbor.

Globalization has changed the way in which people groups interact. People do not have to read textbooks to learn about other people groups. They have first hand knowledge. Go to the grocery store in a major city of the West, and you will quite possibly meet a Muslim friend from another part of the world. Moreover, with electronic communications, a person is also able to meet others half a world away while never leaving the comforts of home. Our world has truly become a global village.

This globalization provides the means for people groups, cultures, and belief systems to interact more fully and to understand each other. People have essentially the same basic needs, but they express them differently based upon their cultural and religious upbringings. Meaningful interaction between human beings begins in understanding one another’s cultures and needs.

Allah Almighty

“In the name of Allah, most gracious, most merciful” are the words that every Muslim utters when beginning all daily actions. Abdullah Yusuf Ali, in his commentary to Surah 2:27, says that “all bounties proceed from Allah” (Ali, p. 17). It is then proper for the Muslim to give thanks and praise to Allah (God) for the blessing of life. “All the world and all the affairs of mankind belong only to him (Allah)” (Ellwood p. 313). Thus the *muezzin* in his five-times-a-day cry says:

Allah is great! Allah is great!
There is no God but Allah,
And Muhammad is his prophet!
(At dawn, he here adds:
Prayer is better than sleep!

Prayer is better than sleep!)
Allah is great! Allah is great!
There is no God but Allah (Ellwood, p. 313).

The greatness, holiness and unity of Allah are the central beliefs of Islam. Accordingly, man is created to serve Allah and to submit to his supreme rule. In other words, humanity is God's representative (*khalifa*), and this is humanity's destiny exercised by individuals and society in a servant (*abd*) mode (Martinson, p. 105).

Allah is the creator of the world, and natural phenomena or creation in general are signs of the deity of Allah (Martinson, p. 66). Abdullah Yusuf Ali comments in his introduction to Surah 45, saying, "The signs of Allah are everywhere: His power, wisdom, and goodness are shown through all creation and revelation" (Ali, p. 1292). Allah is also held to be present in every social grouping. There is no secret that is hidden from him. He knows all things, he can do all things and is everywhere (Surah 58: 7). He is God, gracious and merciful, very interested in the details of life on earth (Martinson, p. 68).

The unity of Allah, who knows all things, who is everywhere and who can do all things, is also a teaching that is at the heart of Islam. The man who calls the faithful to prayer every day summons them by reminding all around the city or village that Allah is great and there is no god beside him, or he has no partner (Surah 6:163). All glory and honor belongs to Allah (Surah 11:73).

When the call to worship is announced, "There is no god except Allah and Muhammad is the Apostle of God," Muslims bears witness to their faith. It is also this confession or creed confessed with intention that makes a person a Muslim (Cragg, p. 27). But the negative form of the Muslim creed is an indication that the name Allah was known to pre-Islamic Arabia. The prophet Muhammad's mission was, then, not only to proclaim the existence of God but to deny the existence of all other lesser gods (Cragg, p. 31). He declares in Surah 4: 116 that Allah does not forgive the sin of "joining other gods." Ali comments on this verse saying, "Blasphemy in the spiritual kingdom is like treason in the political kingdom (Ali, p. 223). In other words, the unity of Allah is not to be compromised, and for a person to become a Muslim he/she has to fully submit to the sovereignty of Allah (Cragg, p. 33).

Muhammad the Messenger of Allah

Muhammad, the last prophet of Allah, is at the center of Islamic faith. Born in 570 A.D. in the city of Mecca, Muhammad began his prophecy at the age of 40 and died in 632 AD. During the time of Muhammad, the people of Mecca worshiped many gods, and about the year 611 Muhammad started to have his vision. From 611-621, Muhammad implored the people of Mecca to return to the worship of the true God, Allah. Muhammad suffered opposition from his fellow Meccans and had to flee to Medina in the year 622, and this journey to Medina is

called Hegira (emigration), which marks the beginning of Mohammed's public and organizational work (Ellwood, 315).

“The essence of Mohammed's message was not the enunciation of the existence, but of the sole existence, of Allah and of the criminal folly of all other worship” (Cragg, 65). The pre-Muhammad Islamic Arabian society was in what is called “*Jahiliyyah*” (time of ignorance) (Cragg, 65). It was to this Arabian society and to the whole world that Muhammad was sent by Allah to proclaim the way.

The Qur'an and the Five Pillars of Islam

The Qur'an is a collection of the revelations of Muhammad, which for Muslims is the Word of God (*Kalam Allah*) with absolute authority. The name Qur'an means recitation; this and the Qur'an text itself states that the Qur'an is verbally revealed. But verbal inspiration does not mean that God spoke to Muhammad in sound but “through *wahy* (i.e., through idea-word inspiration)” (Rahman, 31). Islam says that the revelations contained in the Qur'an were revealed to Muhammad since 611 AD until the time of his death in 632.

The opening chapter of the Qur'an summarizes the spirit of the book (Ellwood, 317). The nature (attributes) of Allah, the responses of man and principles of life are the main teachings of the Qur'an (Surah 1: 1-7). The main interest of Qur'an is the betterment of man (Rahman, 35), and for that reason the Qur'an sets forth the five pillars of Islam: confession of faith, prayer five times a day, charity or alms-giving to the poor, fasting in the month of Ramadan, and the *hajj* or pilgrimage to Mecca.

First, the confession of faith is that every Muslim declares that there is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is his *rasul* (prophet or envoy) or “God's appointed spokesman (Ellwood, 322). The Muslim in this confession declares his/her total submission to Allah.

Second, as the *muezzin* calls the faithful to prayer, all Muslims take the time to pray five times a day. The Qur'an mentions only three prayers a day, so the practice of five prayers a day is taken to be the “later usage of the prophet Muhammad” (Rahman, 36). Ellwood also states that there are no prayers for individual needs, because the relationship of a Muslim to Allah should be “one of faith, praise, gratitude, and obedience, and that God knows one's specific needs before one can ask” (Ellwood, p. 323)

Third, a Muslim gives to the needy believer in secret in the hope that Allah will also remove the stains of evil from him/her (Surah 2:271). Ali mentions in his comments on Surah 9:58 that Muslims are to give “2 ½ percent of merchandise and 10 percent on the fruits of the earth” to an organized Muslim community for the poor and needy (Ali, p. 455).

Fourth, the fasting during the month of Ramadan, which moves progressively through seasons, is based on the lunar calendar. In the month of Ramadan the Muslims do not eat or

drink between daybreak and dark for 28 days. During the day they would pray all day, frequenting the mosque, and they would dine together with their families in the evening and in the morning before daybreak. Their meals are combined with the reading of the Qur'an and prayer (Ellwood, 323).

The fifth pillar is the pilgrimage to Mecca, known as *hajj*. The minors, elderly, poor and infirm, who cannot go on the pilgrimage, are exempted from this obligation. All other Muslims who have the ability and the means have to go to Mecca on a pilgrimage at least once in a lifetime.

The other major aspect of the Muslim religion is also the socio-political role played by the Qur'an in a Muslim society. The Qur'an is primarily a religious book, but it also "embodies some important legal enunciations issued during the community-state building process of Medina" (Rahman, 37). Cragg also notes that the Qur'an is the first source of the "ruling and source of law" as it reveals to mankind what is good. Tradition interprets and enlarges the meaning (Cragg, 131). There is no separation of the state from the Islamic faith. Allah is in control, and all social powers have to serve the will of Allah.

Islam – Christianity: Similarities

Moses declares: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one!" (Deuteronomy 6:4) The greatest similarity of Islam and Christianity is that the two religions are monotheistic (although drastically different in understanding the nature of this Oneness). Some missiologists would say that Christians and Muslims not only believe in one God, but also that they worship the same God (Dretke, p. 33). This, however, is an overstatement. As mentioned earlier, Mohammed's mission was not to tell the people of Arabia what they do not know, but to remind them to return to the worship of Allah alone. Muhammad also recommends to all Muslims "that they should not dispute with the 'people of the book'" (Surah 29:46). As a result, Christianity and Islam managed to live together side-by-side though sometimes amid hostility and strife (Cooper, p. 209).

The character (attributes, perfections) of God as described in the Bible and the Qur'an are similar. God is the creator and author of all creation, the heavens and the earth and all in them (Gen. 1; Surah 57: 1-4). God is holy, merciful, gracious, all powerful, all knowing. God is everywhere. As Muslims do, Christians believe in the sovereignty of God (Jer. 43:10; Is 44: 28; 45:1). God is the ruler of all world rulers, "both religious and political, that they represent" (Cooper, p. 30). The authorities in the world are believed to have been appointed by God to serve him by governing well, and people are to be subject to governing authorities (Rom. 13:1-4). The Bible also declares that the law of God is written in the heart of all human beings (Rom. 2:15). All people are without excuse before God. When they break the law of God their conscience either accuses them or excuses them to do what their evil hearts desire.

Christians and Muslims agree that God will judge all human beings at the end, and those who disobeyed God's will will be punished with an eternal life in hell. Moreover, this will happen when Jesus comes again (Cooper, p. 75). The Qur'an says that on the Day of Judgment "all mankind will stand before the Lord of the worlds" (Surah 83:4-6). In numerous places the Bible also speaks of the second coming of Jesus as judge of all people, on which day the wicked will be condemned to eternal suffering and the righteous to eternal life (2 Pet. 3).

This brings us to the nature of man. Both Christians and Muslims believe that God created human beings. Muslims say that "as turned out from God's hand of Allah, man is innocent, pure, free, inclined to right and virtue, and endowed with true understanding about his own position in the universe and about Allah" (Ali, 1016). Christians also believe that man is created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26). Both agree that man was created righteous in the Garden of Eden and was thrown out of the garden because of sin (Martinson, 106). Because of lawlessness mankind needs a remedy. The remedy to Muslims is good deeds, but to Christians, as promised in Gen. 3:15, the remedy is a Savior.

Man is also created to multiply and fill the earth (Gen. 1:28). The stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are also examples of God being interested in the family, with the man as its head. Childlessness is a shame in the Islamic community, as in the stories of the Old Testament (Cooper, 47). The family, unlike modern Western society, is the extended family in which members are interdependent on each other (Cooper, 157). But this concept of the extended family is not foreign to Christianity. Individualism is a modern Western concept that is not necessarily Christian (Cooper, 156). Neither is separation between spiritual and the secular a Christian concept. The Bible tells us that God is interested not only in the spiritual being of man, but also in his whole being, his body and soul, his spiritual and his socio-political activities. (Matthew 22:37).

Muslims and Christians are aware of their need for forgiveness. Muslims pray, "Our Lord! Lay not on us a burden greater than we have strength to bear. Blot out our sins, and grant us forgiveness" (Surah 2:286). Christians also pray the confession of King David saying, "Have mercy upon me, O God, according to your loving kindness; according to the multitude of your tender mercies, blot out my transgressions" (Ps. 51:1). In both cases man is a sinner and needs God to forgive him. But Muslims and Christians have different understandings of the teaching of sin and how God saves the sinner.

Areas of Tension

In almost all the areas where there are similarities, tensions also exist. For example, God is understood as merciful and forgiving in Islam and Christianity, but what does this mean? That God is a forgiving God is a teaching of Qur'an, but He is also the judge who will weigh every atom of man's sins on a scale (Surah 99:1-8). If the bad deeds of man outweigh the good deeds, the person will then be condemned to hell (ELCA p. 65). For Christians, this is not the nature of God. When Adam and Eve sinned against God in the beginning (Gen. 3), God banished them from the garden. Yet He took the initiative to restore His relationship with them. Gen. 3:15 records God's promise of a Savior to Adam and Eve. For Christians, God is the only One Who can and the only One Who has restored His relationship with sinful man. But for the Muslim man has to do the work in the five pillars of faith to mend his broken relationship or to tip the scale to the side of good.

The tension between Christianity and Islam could also be characterized as the battle of the books (Cooper, 96). The Qur'an teaches that the Bible is from God and must be believed (Cooper, 94). But this teaching of the Qur'an does not endorse the Bible as a book without error. The Muslim says that the Christians and Jews have corrupted the Bible; as a result its teachings are not all true (Dretke, 178). But the crucial difference between the two is on what they believe to be the Bible's focus. "The Qur'an claims to be the revelation of the law and the will of God." The New Testament, however, "claims to be the historic, divinely inspired and accurate record of the life and teaching of Jesus Christ" (Cooper, 96).

This tension about the inspiration of the books is also heightened by Christianity's claim of the Bible as the only inspired Word of God, and that nothing can be added to the Bible (Dretke p. 177). But there are some Christians who say that the Qur'an contains some truth about God and his will (Cooper p. 95). Islam and Christian dialogue is then to be always challenged by these two books' claim of inspiration, which almost dictates that one has to be true while the claim of the other is false.

The Christian religion is also characterized by love: love of God and neighbor (1 Cor. 13). Islam, however, teaches that fighting for the sake of Allah is good, and those slain in fighting for the sake of Allah will be rewarded (Surah 4:71-77). On the contrary, Jesus teaches His disciples to love their enemies, bless those who curse them, do good to those who hate them, and pray for those who persecute them (Matt. 5:44). Stephen, when he was being stoned by the Pharisees prayed, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin" (Acts 7:60). Christianity says that turning the other cheek, as Jesus did when His enemies persecuted Him, is the loving thing to do. In other words, Christianity will say, "Repay no evil for evil . . . Beloved do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay'" (Rom. 12:17-19). Islam, however, will encourage or command people to raise the sword for the sake of Allah, especially against the enemies of Islam.

The raising of the sword for the sake of Allah suggests a question about the mercy and love of Allah. How can a loving God order his envoys on earth to use a weapon of hate to proclaim his gospel to people in darkness? If God is love, why would he destroy the unbeliever and give him no chance to know who he truly is? This tension is at the heart of the difference between Islam and Christianity. And this point raises the issue of Jesus the Messiah. Who is Jesus after all?

The Major Difference between Islam and Christianity: Concerning Jesus

Jesus and His work stands at the center of the controversy between Islam and Christianity. For Muslims Jesus is a prophet, not God (Surah 4:171). He was created (Surah 3:59) by Allah. Surah 112 reads, “He is Allah, the one and only; Allah, the eternal, Absolute; He begetteth not, Nor is He begotten; and there is none like unto Him.” In other words, Jesus cannot be God and also be born as a man.

The deity of Jesus is an offense to Muslims. The Qur’an says, “In blasphemy indeed are those who say that Allah is Christ the son of Mary” (Surah 5:17). In a paternalistic society such as that engendered by Islam, the man is the head of the household. For a son to be called the son of his mother is culturally unacceptable. The Qur’an, however, is willing to call Jesus the son of Mary and to accept that Jesus was born of a virgin. It is only the almighty God who can do things that are contrary to the law of nature. The virgin birth of Jesus is also a mysterious act of God. But Muslims are not able to explain this extraordinary phenomenon, while Christians believe that Jesus is the Messiah, God incarnate. The Bible says, “Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,” which is translated, ‘God with us’” (Matt. 1:23).

Islam honors Jesus as one of the greatest prophets, but it does not believe that He is God. Here lies a contradiction that Muslims cannot reconcile. If Jesus is one of the greatest prophets who honored God with his word and deeds, then his words are true. Jesus has claimed to be God saying, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30). If Jesus’ words are not true then He is not God, but this implies that He was not a prophet also. You cannot deny Jesus as God, yet believe that He is a prophet.

The crucifixion of Jesus for the sake of mankind’s sins forms another offense to Muslims, as does His resurrection. Islam says that Jesus, Messiah of Israel (Surah 3:49), was neither crucified and nor resurrected (Surah 4:157). The historical facts tell us differently. Secular historians contemporary with the apostolic church have mentioned Jesus’ crucifixion, and the centuries-old Christian tradition tells the story of Jesus death, burial, and resurrection. In the Gospel account the Jews did not deny Jesus death, but said that the disciples stole the body and claimed the resurrection (Matt. 28:13). These are historical facts that Islam has ignored. All these are indications of the hardening of the heart to the saving message of the Gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ.

That Jesus' crucifixion was for the sake of mankind's sins forms still another offense to Muslims. They say that God would not allow his prophet to be disgraced, so the Jews did not crucify Jesus. It is true that the Jews did not murder Jesus so much as He was giving His life willingly for the sake of the world (John 10:17-18). God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself (2 Cor. 5:19). But humankind, according to Islam, is born without sin and "with the capacity to be and do good for the pleasure of Allah and the benefit of the person's own soul" (ELCA p. 65). Consequently, man does not need a Savior; he is able to merit his salvation by his good works. The idea of God in the person of Jesus dying for man's sin is thus absurd for Muslim thought on several counts. Cooper writes, "A story of failure, of God allowing his servant to be defeated and not to hear his prayer for help and deliver him, seems an unacceptable model for a prophet" (Cooper, p. 70). The Qur'an claims that the not-crucified Jesus was at length raised up by Allah to heaven and lives with Allah in the body in heaven (Sura 4:157f.).

Jesus is a stumbling block to Muslims. They cannot imagine that a prophet could be crucified, let alone that God would take on human nature. Even though they agree with Christians that Jesus' birth and life is a mystery (Ali p. 236), to think that God would condescend to become human is also a folly to Muslims.

Yet this message, which has become foolishness to Muslims, is what has become the power for salvation for all those who believe. The Bible says, "we preach Christ Crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God," (1 Cor. 1:23-24). Man is a sinner, a point with which Muslims would concur (although not with the teaching of original sin). Sinners need a Savior (Rom. 5). Man does not have the power to please God by his works, for however hard he tries to do what is good and pleasing in the sight of God, he always falls short (Rom. 7). But God in his wisdom and loving kindness sent his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, God and Man, Who is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, to save the world (John 3:16). This mystery can be understood and believed only through the power of the Holy Spirit. To God be the Glory forever and ever. Amen!

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