

Jinn, Amulets, and a Prophet Named Isa: Sharing the Gospel with Ordinary Muslims

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What do you expect when a Christian and a Muslim try to discuss their faith? Debate? Misunderstanding? Anger? Frustration?

This paper is a brief and simple attempt to help ordinary Christians understand and converse with ordinary Muslims, especially Muslims whose faith may be described as “folk Islam” rather than classical Islam. In it we will examine some differences between the beliefs of many ordinary Muslims and that of the classical Islam that one might read about in a textbook. We will also note what the *Qur’an* actually says about Jesus, things of which most Christians and many Muslims are unaware. Finally, we will consider how we can talk in ways that will be intelligible and that will lead to the central issue of the Muslim/Christian divide.

Sources

Textbooks generally describe other religions in terms of the written sources available from those religions whenever such sources are available. Inevitably, this leads to a concentration on the form of the religion held by literate followers rather than by average believers who have learned their beliefs orally. While in the realm of Christendom it is certainly

of value to study the writings of Thomas Aquinas, such study does not give insight into the faith of the average European peasant of the thirteenth century.

Certainly, it is important that Christians working with Muslims study the *Qur'an* and other written sources. But it cannot be assumed that such study brings Christians into touch with the mind of the ordinary Muslim. We must especially avoid the assumption that the writings of modern Muslim theologians will be helpful in understanding ordinary Muslims. It could be that Muslim theologians are as out of touch with average Muslims as some Christian theologians are out of touch with ordinary Christians. Or, to illustrate the point with another analogy, the study of classical music is of little value in understanding bluegrass, and the study of classical Islam is of little value in understanding folk Islam.

Folk ways are rarely written down by people themselves. Therefore, the description of folk Islam given in this paper is not based on primary written sources, but on the description given by others who have observed folk Islam in its various manifestations. The description is general, and is intended only as an introduction to the subject. Christians attempting to work with Muslims will have to find out for themselves how this general overview applies in any specific case. While no attempt is made to explain how to know one kind of Muslim from another, it is believed that the perceptive reader will be able to do so just by being aware of the different worldviews involved.

The Worldview of Folk Islam

While classical Islam may have a two-layered view of the universe, not all that different from the view of orthodox Western Christianity, folk Islam has a three-layered universe,

borrowed from animism or tribal religions. In this respect it is not very different from folk Christianity¹ as it existed in the middle ages and as it exists today in Latin America and Africa.²

A great deal of attention has been given to the distinction between *Sunni* and *Shi'a* in Islam. This distinction, while important, should not distract us from a consideration of the fundamental worldview issue. Whether a person is a *Sunni* or a *Shi'a* he is still likely to hold a three layered view of reality, and this worldview difference will be more important in understanding them and communicating with them than the *Sunni/ Shi'a* distinction.

Bill Musk, in his book The Unseen Face of Islam, charts the difference between the view of folk Islam and that of Western believers (176). The Western believer views reality as consisting of two realms: the natural and the supernatural, or, as Musk labels them, the empirical and the trans-empirical. God, angels, and devils are in the trans-empirical; humans and animals are in the empirical. Contact between the two may be viewed as frequent or rare. It is sometimes believed to be overt and obvious, sometimes subtle and unseen, depending on one's theological position in regard to miracles. But all Christians profess some idea of direct contact between the realm of God and the realm of humans.

The view of most tribal religions, folk Islam, and Christo-Paganism are significantly different. They live in a three-layered universe. There is 1.) the empirical world of humans, animals, rocks and trees; there is 2.) the distant trans-empirical world of God; and there is also 3.) an intervening trans-empirical world of ancestors, jinn, and other spiritual forces. This intervening world is in more direct contact with the empirical world than with the distant God, and therefore is of great concern on a daily basis. In fact, this intervening layer of reality may be seen as being in constant operation in certain animals as well as in certain places, rocks and

trees. While the high God (Allah, in the case of the Muslims) may be the only being that must be pleased in order for humans to achieve eternal bliss, other beings must be dealt with in order to live a happy, healthy life on earth. In situations where daily survival is a struggle, there may be more emphasis placed on the relationship with the intervening layer of forces than with the high God.

The realm of the high God (and possibly high angels)

The realm of spirits, ghosts, saints, ancestors, jinn,
angels and various other powers.

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The realm in which humans live

In the figure above, the double line is the supernatural or non-empirical domain. Single line dividers represent divisions within a general domain (natural/empirical or supernatural/non-empirical). The porosity of a line attempts to represent how much one layer is thought to influence the one below.

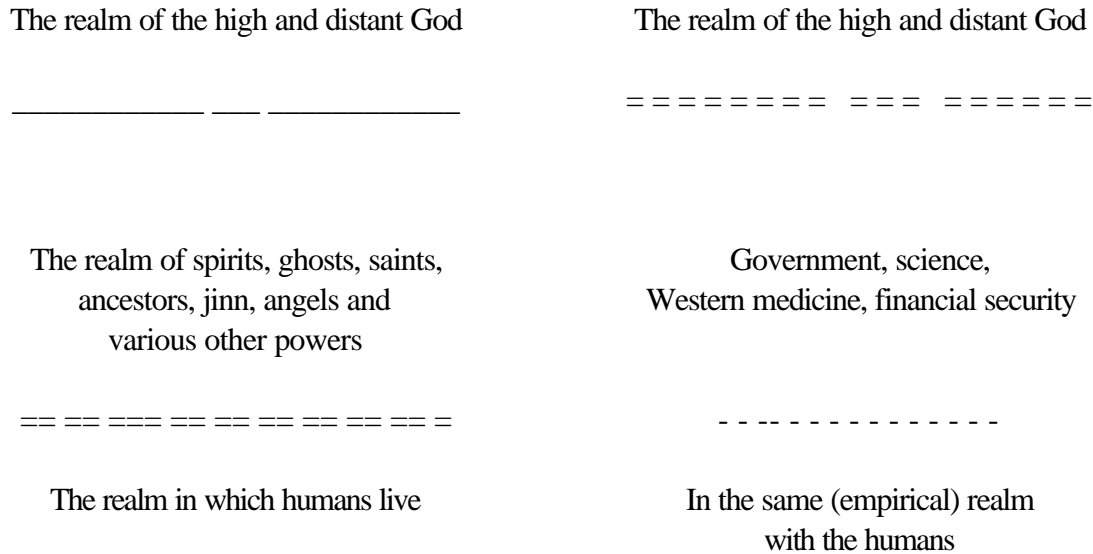
Evaluating the Three Layered Universe

Certain passages within the *Qur'an* may give support to the belief that the supernatural domain is layered, and that human dealings with the supernatural will be mostly with beings other than God. The *Qur'an* speaks of the heavens as being divided into several stories (67:3, 78:12). Angels are mentioned in the *Qur'an* as dealing with humans. Two angels are appointed to each human, they record the actions of every person (50:16-22). One difficult Quranic passage may indicate that the means of magic were taught to humans by the angels *Harut* and *Marut* (2:102). “*Jinn*” (a kind of spirit power distinct from angels and generally thought to be mischievous or wicked) is also mentioned frequently in the *Qur'an* (6:100; 11:119; 15:27; 34:40-41; 72:1-19).

Yet it may not be because of any specific Quranic passages that Islam, of the monotheistic religions, is especially susceptible to this multi-layered view of supernatural reality. The desire to avoid “shirk,” the sin of associating any other being with God, has led to a distancing of God from all other beings. The view of God as remote, and as attending to humans only through intermediaries, is easily accommodated. In fact, such a view is necessary for the ordinary person. For if God is distant from our ordinary daily concerns, we must have some way of dealing with those concerns (cf. Musk, 238).

Many Christians also have been guilty of teaching a remote God. The abstract description of God in the categories of systematic theology can contribute to this impression on the part of many believers. Prior to the enlightenment, many Christians were deeply concerned about the intermediate realm of saints, angels, and demons. Since the enlightenment, science

and western medicine have served this role for Westernized believers (both Christian and Muslim).



While it is tempting to dismiss the worldview of folk religion lightly, the above figure illustrates that such a dismissal is hardly fair. In this figure, the view of folk religion is on the left. Many Western believers hold a similar view, that depicted on the right. But for these Westerners the means of dealing with life’s daily problems has been moved into the empirical domain.

Wherever a distant God is taught, something must be moved into the middle realm to deal with life’s everyday concerns. Western Christians sometimes think that they have greater faith than folk believers, when in truth they have substituted faith in money, insurance, and the “skill” of their doctors for faith in charms and amulets. The proper response to the realm of

ancestors and *jinn* is not to replace it with doctors and insurance agents, but to present the intimate, incarnate God of the Bible.

Finding Common Ground

There is a large amount of common ground between the Christian and the average Muslim. Both believe in one God, although the Muslim will think that the Christian believes in three. Both believe that God spoke to Abraham, Moses, and many of the biblical prophets. Both believe in the virgin birth of Jesus, although the Muslim will call him *Isa*. Both claim to believe in equality before God. Both believe that everything we have is a gift from God and that we must thankfully submit to God's will.

It is perhaps this last point that the Christian would need to emphasize when attempting to build a relationship with a Muslim. The other points of common ground are either already well-known to the Muslim, or perhaps they are sources of confusion and misunderstanding that should not be addressed too early. But Muslims often do not perceive Christians as thankful or willing to submit to God. Submission is central to Islam. The Muslim is one who submits to God (sura 2:128). The Christian wanting to assure a Muslim that they have much in common should consider using passages like 1 Peter 5:3-7. But more important than quoting such passages will be the living of a life that is truly and thankfully submitted to God.

The folk Muslim is aware of the supernatural in every aspect of life. Nearly every act will be prefaced with an appeal to God, a spirit, an ancestor, or some other supernatural force. Christians in the past customarily referred their plans to God's will (James 4:13-16). But today many Christians have the tendency to undertake even major projects and journeys without

prayer or reference to God's will. In doing so we have lost a common ground with the Muslim, in addition to having violated a clear command of Scripture. If we want to work with Muslims, we need to recover the sense of the spiritual in our own daily lives.

Something must also be said in regard to the Quranic teaching about Jesus. The *Qur'an* says more about Jesus than many realize. It would be good if Christians who intend to work with Muslims would be aware of some of these passages.

Jesus is called "*Masih*" (Messiah or Christ) several times in the Quran (3:45;4:157;5:17,72;9:30,31), but it must not be assumed that the Muslim will understand this term in the same way a Christian understands it. Jesus is also called "*abd*," or servant, of God (4:172, 19:30; 43:58), and a sign of the coming judgment (4:61). Jesus is often listed among the prophets in the *Qur'an*, and in one passage he is quoted as speaking (while still a babe in the cradle) and saying, "I am indeed a servant of Allah: he hath given me a revelation and made me a prophet" (19:30).³ Jesus is also called "a word from Allah" (3:39).

All of these passages about Jesus will be understood differently by Muslims and Christians. It is impractical for Christians to try to speak with Muslims about Jesus so long as they are unaware of what the *Qur'an* says about Him. The study of these Quranic passages, and others that mention Jesus, is therefore recommended.

Areas of Difficulty

The areas of difficulty between Christians and Muslims are as great or greater than the areas they hold in common. This is partly because of the different understandings of the things they hold in common, and partly a result of the tendency, on both sides, of making unequal

comparisons. Unequal comparisons are drawn between the ideals of one faith and the reality of another. Many who call themselves Christians make no attempt to live by Christ's standards. If Christians do not want to be baited by a Muslim on this point, then they must not accuse Islam of being the cause of all the violence that springs from people like Saddam Hussein. The *Qur'an* mentions that some Christian leaders are corrupt (9:34). The New Testament acknowledges the same (Phil. 1:15-17, for example). The falsehood of some that claim to be Christians does not disprove true Christianity, nor does the falsehood of some who claim to be Muslims disprove Islam.

The Heart of the Matter

Muslims have trouble with certain Christian affirmations, such as the triune nature of God and the teaching of original sin. They have problems with Christians consuming of forbidden meat and alcohol. They are also confused by some worship practices, such as the use of musical instruments. Folk Muslims have additional practical concerns with the influence of spiritual forces other than God. All of these need some attention, but the critical difficulty for most Muslims is the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. Two Quranic passages are of special concern here. Sura 4:156-158 speaks of the Jews and says,

That they rejected Faith; that they uttered against Mary a grave false charge⁴; that they said, "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 knowledge but only a conjecture to follow, for of a surety they killed him not -- nay Allah raised him unto himself; and Allah is exulted in

power, wise.

Some Muslims teach that Jesus was crucified, but not killed, and that he recovered in the tomb. This would seem to contradict the plain statement of the *Qur'an*. The more common Muslim belief is that Jesus was “raised up” to God before the crucifixion and that someone else was mistakenly crucified in his place. Thus “it was made to appear” to the Jews that they had killed him.

Parrinder and others have argued that the Quranic passage does not say that Jesus was not crucified, only that the Jews did not crucify him. Indeed John 19:11 is pointed out as a New Testament passage that implies the same idea (Parrinder, 119). But such an interpretation of the *Qur'an* is not likely to appeal to many Muslims. On the surface, the passage seems to deny that Jesus died. Most Muslims will accept this as fact.

It should be noted that the problem most Muslims have with the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus is not the same as that of most secularists. Secularists deny the Gospel because they cannot accept the miracle of the resurrection. Muslims have little objection to the miraculous. They deny not so much the resurrection but the crucifixion. Their sense of God’s honor does not allow them to believe that a divine messenger might have been treated in this way (cf. Huffard).

The other Quranic passage that refers to the death of Jesus is Sura 19:33.5. Here Jesus is quoted as saying, “So peace is on me the day I was born, the day that I die, and the day that I shall be raised up to life again.” Here Christians see a clear reference to the Gospel story, much as it is recorded in the New Testament. Muslim scholars have employed considerable toil

over this passage. Those who claim that he was snatched up without seeing death generally explain that he will come again some day and then will die. On the surface, this hardly fits.

How a discussion of these passages would proceed between Muslims and Christians is hard to predict. The fact is we rarely get to this critical discussion. Long before reaching this point one side offends the other and the discussion is broken off. Until Christians and Muslims have grappled with the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus they have not really touched on the heart of the matter at all (1 Cor. 2:2; 15:1-3). But we have trouble getting there, and trouble communicating once there.

Getting to the Heart

How do we get to the heart of the matter with the ordinary Muslim, and converse intelligibly once there?

If the ordinary Muslim sees his Christian neighbor as someone either unaware of or unconcerned with the (spiritual) forces that are concern him greatly, there will be no motive for serious discussion. Christians ought to be aware of the spiritual dimension in daily life. They ought not to make plans without reference to God (James 4:13-16), they ought to be constant in prayer (1 Thess. 5:17). Prayer and other signs of trust in God ought to characterize the lives of Christians, whether they have Muslim friends or not. Materialism and other signs of trust in this world ought not to characterize us. A greater awareness of God in daily life is the first prerequisite for study with a Muslim, especially a folk Muslim. The fear of the unseen intermediate realm is their greatest felt need. If our God is distant and remote, there will be no point in learning about him.

No Muslim will feel comfortable with Christians who have dogs around the house, or serve pork at a meal. A willingness to adapt in these, and similar matters, is the second prerequisite for study with a Muslim.

Once a discussion has begun there will be no substitute for a practical understanding of the atonement, and an ability to explain it plainly. We must never deny that it is in some ways beyond our comprehension. After all, why serve a God we can fully comprehend with our finite minds? But we must not be satisfied with childish answers regarding the matters of eternity. The careful study of passages like Romans 3, 1 Corinthians 15, Philippians 2, as well as some knowledge of the relevant Quranic passages, is a third prerequisite.⁶

Many Muslims tend to expect rejection, misrepresentation, and misunderstanding when they speak with Christians. Study, and thoughtful consideration of their world view can help us to overcome this.

NOTES

¹Often called Christo-Paganism.

²This view may be returning in America. Note the recent interest in angels in American Christianity.

³“God” in Yusuf Ali’s original edition.

⁴Accusing her of conceiving through immorality.

⁵There are a few others that refer to it without using the word death. Those interested in such passages may see Parrinder, 106ff.

⁶John Stott’s The Cross of Christ will point the reader to many other relevant New Testament passages, and give some helpful illustrations.