

Jesus and Muslims

By David Feddes

Christianity and Islam are the world's top two religions in terms of numbers. More people call themselves Christians than any other religion, and Muslims are the second largest group. Numbers don't prove truth, and many claiming to be Christians or Muslims have little commitment. Still, Christianity and Islam are the two most widespread faiths in the world today.

The way Christians and Muslims deal with each other is extremely important. The number of people involved is so huge, the feeling so strong, and the history of conflict so painful, that we need to find ways to talk together without attacking each other. Various confrontations and killings have occurred and continue to occur in various parts of the world. In view of so much hate and bloodshed, it is clearly foolish to provoke each other needlessly.

At the same time, it's also foolish to ignore differences between Christianity and Islam. Some religious pluralists claim that all religions point to the same reality, that all religions are equally effective in helping humans relate to the spiritual realm, and that any differences don't really matter. Pluralism tries to blend all religions into one new brew and pretend they're essentially the same. But that doesn't work. A pluralist isn't faithful to Islam or to Christianity. I'm as eager as anyone for Christians and Muslims to get along better, but let's not insult both Christians and Muslims by denying differences between the two faiths. Instead, let's be honest about our differences, even as we take note of significant similarities.

Common Ground

Muslims and Christians do have some important things in common. So let's first look at common ground, and then we'll discuss some differences. One thing Muslims and Christians have in common may seem too obvious even to mention, but I'll say it anyway: Muslims and Christians are people. We are humans with God-given value. We are not animals, and we shouldn't treat each other as animals. We are not demons, and we shouldn't treat each other as demons. We are human, and we should treat each other as humans. Whether Christian or Muslim or something else, each of us wants to be treated with fairness and respect, so we should treat others with fairness and respect. We should not base our opinions of others on fear, hatred, or prejudice, but on fact. Muslim terrorists have done some terrible things, but that does not make all Muslims terrorists. Many Muslims reject terrorism and simply want to live a peaceful, productive life. Likewise, some people in countries with Christian roots have peddled pornography, but that does not mean all Christians want to corrupt the world. Bible-believing Christians want to live at peace with all people and to show love to all, following in the footsteps of Jesus. Muslims and Christians alike have in common the fact that both are human.

Another thing both faiths have in common is an impressive record of accomplishment. Both faiths have formed the foundation of splendid civilizations. Both have made major contributions to world culture. Many of the world's great philosophers, writers, mathematicians, scientists, and inventors have been Christians from predominantly Christian countries. Muslim societies also have made major contributions. Arabic numerals are used by almost all of us. Muslim concern for clean living and healing has produced advances in medicine. Muslims have made major scientific discoveries and have written powerful poetry, gripping stories, and brilliant philosophy.

Islam and Christianity have more in common than cultural impact. They also share some key beliefs and ideals. Both faiths are monotheistic. Christians agree with Muslims that there are

not many gods but one. Both faiths reject polytheistic belief in various gods and goddesses. Both faiths reject pantheistic belief that all things are God or part of God. Both faiths reject atheistic belief that no God exists. Christians and Muslims agree that there is one all-powerful, all-knowing Being, with no beginning or end, who rules over all things.

Muslims, like Christians, believe in divine creation and reject random evolution. The world and the things in it are products of intelligent design, not mindless chance. This is plain to anyone willing to look at the evidence; it is also stated clearly in the Bible and the Qur'an (also referred to as the Koran, the book Muslims revere). Christians and Muslims agree that all things began with the Creator's action, and they agree that the Creator continues ruling all things. Muslims and Christians agree that angels are real and active. Muslims and Christians agree that death is not the end of any human, but that people live on forever. Muslims and Christians agree that those who are right with the Almighty will enjoy an unending paradise of blessing, and that those who remain rebels against the Almighty will suffer forever in the flames of hell.

Islam and Christianity agree on many moral principles. They agree that it is wrong to worship idols. They agree that murder, adultery, stealing, and lying are wrong. Islam and Christianity agree that abortion and homosexuality are wrong. Islam and Christianity agree that family is important. Islam and Christianity agree on the value of hard work and of honest business practices. Islam and Christianity agree that women are to be treated as persons, not property. Islam and Christianity agree that it's right to help the poor and wrong to neglect their needs. Many commands and moral principles in the Muslim Qur'an agree with similar commands in the Christian Bible.

In fact, Islam teaches that writings in the Bible are revelations from God to his holy prophets. Islam says that the first five books of the Bible, called the *Taurat* in Arabic, were revealed to the prophet Moses. Islam says that the book of Psalms, also called the *Zabur*, was revealed to the prophet David. Islam says that the New Testament gospel, also called the *Injil*, came through the prophet Isa, the Arabic name for Jesus.

Agreement About Jesus

Muslims and Christians agree on some key facts about Jesus. The Qur'an and the Bible agree that Jesus was born of a virgin named Mary, who became pregnant by a divine miracle, not by the act of any earthly father. The Qur'an and the Bible agree that Mary was a holy woman blessed by God. The Qur'an and the Bible agree that Jesus' coming was "good news." The Qur'an and the Bible both give Jesus the title "Messiah." The Qur'an and the Bible agree that Jesus did amazing miracles. The Bible tells more details about the wonders Jesus did, but the Qur'an agrees that Jesus gave sight to the blind, healed lepers, and raised the dead. Muslim tradition holds that Jesus was without sin, as does the Bible. Muslim tradition also says that Jesus will return someday, reign over the earth, and usher in the end time.

The Qur'an says some things about Jesus that it says about nobody else. Only Jesus and nobody else is called "Messiah" in the Qur'an. Only Jesus and nobody else is called "the Spirit from God" in the Qur'an. Only Jesus and nobody else is called "the Word of God" and "the Word of Truth" in the Qur'an. As highly as Muslims regard Muhammad, not even Muhammad is called "Messiah" or "Spirit from God" or "Word of God," and not even Muhammad is said to have raised the dead or given sight to the blind. The Qur'an attributes those things only to Jesus.

As I've been describing some of the similarities between Islam and Christianity, some of you may have been surprised. If you are a Muslim who has not carefully studied what the Qur'an or the *hadith* traditions say about Jesus, you might be surprised at how highly Islam speaks of

Jesus. In your mosque or Muslim community, you might not hear Jesus spoken of so highly. But everything I've said so far is found in the Qur'an or the hadith traditions. A devout Muslim scholar writes, "Muslims have great respect and love for Jesus (Isa) the Messiah. He is one of the greatest prophets of Allah. To deny the prophethood of Jesus is to deny Islam."

If some Muslims are surprised by the common ground I've highlighted, some Christians may also be surprised. If you're a Christian who doesn't know much about Islam, you might not have known what Muslim teaching actually says. You might be especially surprised that Muslims hold Jesus in such regard.

In all honesty, some Muslims beliefs about Jesus are closer to the Bible than the beliefs of some people who call themselves Christians. Some so-called Christians, including even some pastors and scholars, do not accept that Jesus was miraculously born of a virgin or that he worked mighty miracles by divine power or that God spoke to the writers of the Bible. Muslims are closer to Christian belief than are misguided pseudo-Christians who have slipped away from biblical revelation into secularism. It's good to recognize common ground between Christians and Muslims. But important differences remain.

Is God Trinity?

One key difference concerns the Trinity. Christianity teaches that there is one God and that this one God is a union of three divine persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The oneness of Father, Son, and Spirit is such that it is wrong to speak of three Gods. There is only one God, an eternal union of love in the Holy Trinity. The Bible says "God is love." That's not just because God is loving toward us but also because God's inner being is characterized by the eternal love that unites Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Qur'an almost never speaks of God's love for humanity, whereas the Bible often tells of God's love and even says, "God *is* love." This love can be seen in God's actions and in his very nature as Trinity.

Sometimes the Trinity has been misunderstood. I remember standing in an African cultural center containing statues of various gods, goddesses, and spirits. The guide explained what each statue represented to the people of that area: there was a god of thunder and power, a goddess of childbearing and fertility, and a variety of others. On the highest pedestal of the shrine stood three figures. The guide said these three figures represented the Trinity: the Father, the virgin Mary, and their son Jesus!

That confused view of the Trinity is not what the Bible teaches or what Christians believe. But that's a notion that has popped up in various places throughout history, and that's what some Muslims think the Trinity means to Christians: God had physical relations with Mary, producing the Son, Jesus. Well, if you're a Muslim, let me just say that if that's what Trinity means, then I reject it just as much as you do. Mary is not a divine being to be worshiped, God did not have physical union with Mary to produce Jesus, and the Trinity is not a collection of three separate gods. Christians are not polytheists.

Muhammad rejected the Trinity. It's possible that he was familiar only with strange, distorted views of the Trinity such as what I've described. If that's the notion of Trinity he was rejecting, Muhammad was right to do so. But that still doesn't answer the question whether or not the one God really is Trinity as understood by Bible-believing Christians.

The Qur'an denies that Jesus is the eternal Son of God, with the same divine nature as God the Father. The Qur'an denies that the Holy Spirit is a divine person along with the Father and the Son. In fact, the Q'uran (5:72-75) threatens punishment and hell for those who say Jesus

is God come to earth and who believe in the Trinity. A Muslim writer says, “The doctrine of Trinity, equality with Allah, and sonship, are repudiated as blasphemies.”

The Trinity, however, is not some phony idea that some deceptive Christians made up on their own. According the Bible, Jesus himself said, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30). The Bible says of Jesus, “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word” (Hebrews 1:3). Jesus also said that after he went to heaven, his Father and he would send the Holy Spirit to live among and within the Lord’s people to give them life and guide them into truth.

Muslims believe that Jesus was born of a virgin through a great miracle. They believe that Jesus was a prophet and did marvelous miracles. They even speak of Jesus as Messiah in some sense. But they do not accept that in the virgin birth, the eternal Son of God took on a human nature. They do not accept Jesus as the Son of God, with all the divine attributes of God the Father.

The Qur’an says that the book containing the gospel, the *Injil*, is the place to go for more information about Jesus. If you read the gospel, you find statements from Jesus himself and from his closest friends, clearly identifying Jesus as God. But many Muslims don’t actually read the *Injil*, and they think that any statement of Jesus declaring himself one with God must be a corruption that crept into the Bible over the centuries.

But consider the facts. The authors of the Bible knew Jesus personally, saw him in action, heard him speak, enjoyed close friendship with him, and wrote exactly what God directed them to write. The gospel writings were recorded six centuries before the Qur’an, and we have ancient manuscripts that go back long before Muhammad’s time. Those ancient manuscripts match the Bible as we have it today, and in those manuscripts, Jesus says, “I and the Father are one.”

The apostle John was the dearest personal friend of Jesus during his time on earth. John heard Jesus say, “I and the Father are one.” John heard Jesus’ enemies accuse him of blasphemy and snarl, “You, a mere man, claim to be God” (John 10:30,33). But Jesus proved his claim by rising from the dead and by accepting the worship of a disciple who called him, “My Lord and my God” (John 20:28). The apostle John heard these things and wrote them down. His purpose in writing about Jesus, he said, is “that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31).

Many people did believe in Jesus as God’s Son. Others hated him and wanted him dead. Later on, still others would claim that although Jesus was somehow special, he was not the eternal Son of God who came to earth in human flesh. John, under God’s direction, said, “Such a man is the antichrist—he denies the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also” (1 John 2:22). It’s not enough to say Jesus was a prophet or someone special. We must believe in Jesus as God with us.

The Cross, Sin, and Salvation

The apostle John writes, “If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God” (1 John 4:15). “God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life” (1 John 5:10) “We know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding... He is the true God and eternal life” (1 John 5:20).

Christianity accepts Jesus as God and trusts the death and resurrection of Jesus as the basis of forgiveness and eternal life. Jesus died on a cross to pay the penalty of sin for all who

trust him. He rose again to give joyous eternal life to his people. This salvation is a free gift of God to all who believe and entrust themselves to Jesus.

Islam denies all this. As one Muslim puts it, “Muslims do not believe that Jesus is God, nor do they believe that God ever chose to come down to earth in a form of a man to die for our sins to purify us and forgive us.” Muslims don’t believe that our sins can be paid for by the suffering and death of Jesus. In fact, they don’t believe Jesus died at all.

The Qur’an says that Jesus’ enemies thought they killed him but were fooled by appearances. Islam agrees with Christianity that Jesus’ enemies wanted to kill him and that Jesus was willing to die. But the Qur’an denies that Jesus actually died. Muslims believe that someone else, probably Judas, was made to look like Jesus and was nailed to the cross instead of Jesus. The enemies of Jesus thought they killed him, but they actually killed someone else. God fooled them. Jesus himself was taken directly to heaven.

If Jesus did not die, then he obviously did not pour out his blood to pay for the sins of the world, and he did not conquer death by rising from the grave. In that case, how can we be right with God and live in paradise forever? Islam says eternal life depends on how good a person is, not on how loving God is. A Muslim seeks eternal life by working for it, not by trusting Jesus to provide free forgiveness through his death and eternal life through the power of his resurrection. The Bible says, “Christ died for the ungodly... God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). But Islam seldom mentions God’s love and says Jesus did not die at all.

Christianity teaches that we are born sinners and are unable to free ourselves from sin or earn a right standing with God. But Islam denies that humanity is fallen. All people are born good but forgetful; they just need to be reminded of what God wants. Christianity teaches that even biblical heroes of faith were sinners who did some terrible things, but Islam says otherwise. The Bible says that Noah got drunk (Genesis 9:21), that Abraham lied (Genesis 20:2), that David committed adultery and murder (2 Samuel 11). But Islam denies that such serious sins were ever committed by prophets of God.

In Islam salvation is earned by those who deserve it. In Christianity salvation is God’s gift to the undeserving. A leading Muslim scholar says, “Islam does not identify with the Christian conviction that man needs to be redeemed. The Christian belief in the redemptive sacrificial death of Christ does not fit the Islamic view that man has always been fundamentally good.” Islam is a religion of law, of rules and regulations: the best thing God has done for us is giving a law that tells us exactly what to do. Christianity is a religion of love: the best thing God has done for us is to give us himself in the person of Jesus to die and rise again for our salvation.

The Bible says, “A man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ... If righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing” (Galatians 2:16,21). Islam teaches that righteousness *can* be gained through the law. If we don’t need Jesus’ death to make us right with God, it would mean Christ died for nothing. Islam follows that logic but takes it in the opposite direction. Islam would not want to say Jesus died for nothing, so instead it says Jesus did not die at all. One reason Jesus could not have been crucified, according to Islam, is that humanity is not sinful enough to need him to die for us. Another reason is simply that God would not let his holy prophet die disgracefully. In the words of a Muslim author, “It would seem most inappropriate for the Messiah to die through a shameful crucifixion. God, who is just, would not permit the righteous Messiah to suffer in that manner.”

Rejecting the death of Jesus, Islam prefers to think that humans have the ability to earn eternal life through our own efforts. A Muslim must submit to the Five Pillars of Islam: (1)

declare that there is no God but Allah, whose prophet is Muhammad; (2) pray five times each day; (3) give to the poor; (4) fast each year during the month of Ramadan; and, (5) if possible, go on a pilgrimage to Mecca, the Arabian city where Muhammad established Islam. Islam teaches that if a Muslim observes these Five Pillars faithfully and submits to the many other rules and regulations in the Qur'an, he can earn entrance into heaven. According to Islam, humans are not born in sin, so they don't need salvation—they just need the guidance of Islamic law on what they must do to measure up to the requirements for getting into heaven.

Islam sees God mainly as a Master who deals with his servants on the basis of whether they follow his rules. The Bible reveals God not only as a mighty Master but also as a loving Father and a Friend who made a huge sacrifice to pay for the sins of those he loves. Christians must approach God with reverence and awe, but we may also pray to him with confidence. God is not just a supreme monarch far above us. He is a close companion who has lived among us in the person of Jesus and who lives within us Christians in the person of the Holy Spirit. This makes possible a warm, intimate relationship with God.

In pointing out some differences between Christianity and Islam, I don't want to add any fuel to the flames of hatred. I have tried to describe common ground as clearly and appreciatively as I can. I have also tried to describe differences as accurately and as fairly as I can. If on some point I have misrepresented what Muslims believe, I'm sorry, and I invite Muslim friends to send a letter or email to share your thoughts. My hope is to encourage further conversation, not further conflict, between Christians and Muslims.

At the same time, I make no secret of where I stand. I believe in Jesus as one with God. I trust that Jesus died to pay for my sins. I am confident that his resurrection guarantees eternal life for me. I depend on the Holy Spirit living in me. As I share my faith, I invite you simply to look deeply into your own heart. Do you think you are a good person who has kept God's law? Or do you see yourself as a sinner who needs your sin paid for by someone else? Do you believe that God is love, that God's very Being is a Trinity of love from all eternity? Will you accept the free gift of eternal life by trusting the love of God poured out for sinners when Jesus died and rose again? That is the way of salvation. That is the *Injil*, the gospel of Jesus.

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