

Islam - Allah is one, and Christ was just a prophet

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Here are some possible questions for jeopardy or some other TV quiz show. What major religion has gained thousands of converts in North America, including many professional athletes? Is the youngest among major world religions but still one of the largest? Is so missionary minded that it is seeking to convert Western countries, not just African and Asian countries?

The answer to all of the above is Islam, a religion that claims nearly 1 billion followers in countries throughout the world. Islam originated in what is now Saudi Arabia, and from there it expanded along trade routes to Africa and Asia. The country with the most Muslims is Indonesia, with 120 million. In addition, there are millions more in parts of Eastern and Western Europe and in the Americas. One out of every six human beings on the face of the earth subscribes to the faith of Islam.

Islam is the correct name for the religion often incorrectly called Mohammedanism. The word "Islam" means "submission" (to Allah, the God of Mohammed, the man who founded this religion). A believer in Mohammed's religion is a Muslim, meaning "one who lives his life according to God's will."

How Mohammed became a prophet

Born in Arabia in the city of Mecca in A.D. 570, Mohammed came from a prominent and highly respected family. His father died a few days before his birth, and his mother died when he was six years old. Mohammed's grandfather took him in but died when Mohammed was nine. Then he went to live in the home of Abu Talid, his uncle, where he herded flocks. As he grew older, Mohammed got into the caravan trade and accompanied his uncle on trips to Syria and Persia.

Scholars believe that, in his travels, Mohammed developed his concepts of monotheism from several sources, including the Monophysites, who believed that Christ had only a divine nature, and Nestorians, who divided the Incarnate Christ into two separate natures, divine and human, in one person (denying that the man Jesus of Nazareth was both fully God and fully man). In addition, it is believed he absorbed a great deal of teaching from Jews who exposed him to the Talmud.

As a result, it is unlikely that Mohammed's opportunities to learn about "the one true God" came in

great part from anyone who really understood the Bible. Even a Muslim writer like Caesar Farah admits that Mohammed's narration of scriptural events shows he "could not have ... had an educated knowledge of the sacred texts." It is no wonder that Mohammed developed theologically flawed ideas, which he later expressed when developing the Qur'an (also called Koran).

As a young man working in the caravan trade, Mohammed attracted the attention of his employer, a wealthy widow named Khadija. Although she was 40 years old and he was 25 when they were married, they lived happily together and she bore him several children. After his marriage, Mohammed spent much of his time during the next 15 years in solitary meditation. At the age of 40, he received his first revelation while contemplating in a cave on Mount Hira near Mecca. According to Mohammed, the archangel Gabriel came to him during a dream and brought the following command of God: Read in the name of thy Lord who created, who created man of blood coagulated. Read! Thy Lord is the most beneficent who taught by the pen, taught that what they knew not unto men.

From this command to "read" comes the name for the holy book of Islam, the Qur'an, meaning "the reciting" or "the reading." Because Mohammed could not read or write, the Qur'an is his reciting of revelations given to him.

After receiving his first revelation, Mohammed was deeply disturbed and told his wife he thought he might be possessed by jinns, supernatural beings that, according to Arabic folklore, could take human or animal form and influence human affairs. But Khadija assured him that his words were true, as did her cousin, Waraqa ibn Nawfal, who was somewhat familiar with the Jewish and Christian concepts of monotheism. It was through Waraqa's urging, as well as Khadija's, that Mohammed began to preach again in the streets and marketplaces in Mecca. Mohammed never claimed to be divine but insisted that Allah had called him to be a prophet.

Mohammed hated the idolatry and the immorality of the Arabs who lived in Mecca or came there to trade their goods. The rich lorded it over the poor. Greed and selfishness were everywhere, and even infanticide was practiced among the Bedouin tribes. He was met with

bitter opposition, but for many years his influential uncle was able to protect him.

When both Khadija and Mohammed's uncle died in A.D. 620, plots were hatched to kill Mohammed and his followers. Finally, on July 16, 622, Mohammed was forced to flee to Yathrib, a friendlier city to the north. This flight, called the hegira, marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar. The years are counted from "A.H.," meaning "the year of the Hegira." Yathrib was later renamed Madinat an Nabi (City of the Prophet), in honor of Mohammed, but it is more commonly known as Medina. Mohammed became the religious and political leader of the city.

Soon the Meccans organized an army to destroy Mohammed and his followers. The fighting ended in 630 with Islamic forces triumphant. Mohammed entered Mecca and destroyed every idol in the Kaaba, the main temple, except the Black Stone, a sacred meteorite enshrined there. Mohammed then declared the Kaaba to be the most holy shrine in Islam. Since that time it has been the spot toward which all devout Muslims direct their prayers.

During the next two years, Mohammed strengthened his position as the leading prophet and ruler of Arabia. He united the tribes into a vast army to conquer the world for Allah. His death in 632 did not lessen the fervor of his followers. They carried their faith across Asia, Africa, even into Europe — and to this day the growth of Islam has steadily increased to its current worldwide status of nearly 1 billion.

The teachings of Islam

The Qur'an is the sacred scripture of Islam. About four-fifths the length of the New Testament, it includes 114 surahs, or chapters. While the ideas are all credited to God, Mohammed dictated parts of the Qur'an, while the rest came from the writings of disciples who remembered his oral teachings after he died.' Much of the Qur'an jumps from one time and place to another, lacking a narrative unity. Muslims claim, nonetheless, that it is copied from an original in Arabic, which is in heaven.

In addition to the Qur'an, Mohammed developed important teachings and sayings called Sunnah (literally, "path"). The Sunnah became a base for traditions built on Mohammed's conduct as a prophet and how he handled things while being guide, judge and ruler of his Muslim followers.' The Sunnah were gathered into one body of work called the Hadith, which supplements the Qur'an in the same way the Talmud supplements the Hebrew Bible in Judaism.

Still another important body of teachings in Islam is the Shariah, a combination of legal interpretations of the Qur'an and the Sunnah. Shariah means "law," and it lays down a strict and comprehensive guide of life and conduct for Muslims. It includes prohibitions against eating pork and drinking alcoholic beverages, as well

as punishments for stealing, adultery, apostasy (denying Islam) and blasphemy (saying anything derogatory about Islam or Mohammed).

The six doctrines of Islam

Following are the doctrines that every Muslim is required to believe:

- God. There is only one true God and His name is Allah. Allah is all - seeing, all - knowing and all - powerful.
- Angels. The chief angel is Gabriel, who is said to have appeared to Mohammed. There is also a fallen angel named Shaitan (from the Hebrew "Satan"), as well as the followers of Shaitan, the jinns (demons).
- Scripture. Muslims believe in four God-inspired books: the Torah of Moses (what Christians call the Pentateuch), the Zabur (Psalms of David), the Injil (Gospel) of Jesus, and the Qur'an. But, because Muslims believe that Jews and Christians corrupted their Scriptures, the Qur'an is Allah's final word to mankind. It supersedes and overrules all previous writings.
- Mohammed. The Qur'an lists 28 prophets of Allah. These include Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Jonah and Jesus. To the Muslim, the last and greatest prophet is Mohammed.
- The end times. On the "last day," the dead will be resurrected. Allah will be the judge, and each person will be sent to heaven or hell. Heaven is a place of sensual pleasure. Hell is for those who oppose Allah and his prophet Mohammed.
- Predestination. God has determined what He pleases, and no one can change what He has decreed (also known as kismet, the doctrine of fate). From this doctrine comes the most common Islamic phrase, "If it is Allah's Will."

The five pillars of the faith

Besides the six doctrines to be believed, there are five duties to be performed.

- Statement of belief. To become a Muslim, a person must publicly repeat the Shahadah: "There is no god but Allah and Mohammed is the prophet of Allah."
- Prayer. Muslims pray five times a day-at daybreak, noon, midafternoon, after sunset, and early evening." The Muslim must kneel and bow in the prescribed manner in the direction of the holy city, Mecca.
- Alms. Muslim law today requires the believer to give one-fortieth of his profit (2.5 percent). This

offering goes to widows, orphans, the sick and other unfortunates.

- Ramadan. The ninth month of the Islamic lunar year is called Ramadan and is the highest of Muslim holy seasons. Muslims are required to fast for the entire month. Food and drink, as well as smoking and sexual pleasures, are forbidden, but only during daylight hours. During Ramadan, many Muslims eat two meals a day, the first just before sunrise and the other shortly after sunset. During Ramadan, the believer must not commit any unworthy act. If he does, his fasting is meaningless.
- Pilgrimage to Mecca. This is called the Hadji and must be performed at least once in a Muslim's lifetime. However, if the pilgrimage is too difficult or dangerous for the believer, he can send someone in his place."

How the Qur'an contradicts the Bible

The Bible has had an important influence on the teachings of Islam. For instance, the Muslim proudly traces his ancestry to Ishmael, a son of Abraham. Muslim beliefs about the nature of God, the resurrection of the body and judgment are roughly similar to the teachings of the Bible. But there are some striking differences. Following are some of the Muslim ideas that contradict what is taught in the Bible.

For Muslims, God is one, period. The Qur'an explicitly attacks the Christian teaching on the Trinity, saying that anyone who ascribes "partners" to God is committing the sin of shirk (blasphemy). This prohibition is explicitly directed against the Christian doctrine of the Trinity and the teaching that Jesus is God. Many Muslims are also erroneously taught that Christians are really tri-theists who believe in God the Father, Mary the mother and Jesus the Son. This grotesque caricature of the Trinity is a complete misrepresentation of what biblical Christians believe and what the Bible teaches.

Muslims also teach that Allah is transcendent (all-powerful) and relatively impersonal. Of the 99 names ascribed to God in Islam, "Father" is omitted (to avoid the idea of the Father and the Son). This is in stark contrast to the Bible and to Jesus' own teaching, which says that God is our personal heavenly Father. (Compare passages on God's greatness, such as Ps. 77:10-15 and Isa. 43:13, with passages on God's love, such as Deut. 7:8; Jer. 31:3; Eph. 2:4; 1 John 3:1; 4:7.) While one of the 99 Muslim names for God is "the Merciful," He is not viewed primarily as a dispenser of love and grace but more as a righteous judge to whom the Muslim must give account."

The Qur'an denies that Jesus is the Son of God, although it describes the virgin birth in a passage similar to Luke 1:26-38 (see Surah 3:45-47). The Qur'an calls Jesus a prophet, equal to Abraham, Jonah

and others; but places Him in rank far below Mohammed. Surah 4:171 says that "Jesus ... was only a messenger of Allah.... Far is it removed from His transcendent majesty that He should have a son."

Mohammed totally ignored what the New Testament says about Jesus' divinity (see, for example, Matt. 8:29; 17:5; John 1:1-5; 8:58; 10:30; 14:9; 20:28, Col. 1:15-17; 2:9). Instead of admitting that verses like these exist, Muslims claim Christians have changed the Bible.

The Qur'an says that Christ never really died on the cross." "They slew him not nor crucified, but it appeared so unto them" (Surah 4:157). How could this be? According to Islam, Allah took Jesus to heaven just before the crucifixion, because it is unthinkable that an approved prophet of God should face such a humiliating defeat. Who, then, died on the Cross? Muslims say it was Judas (or possibly Simon of Cyrene), made up so cleverly to resemble Jesus that even Mary and the disciples were fooled! Another theory held by certain Muslim sects is that Jesus was taken down from the cross in a coma and that he later revived and traveled to another area where He finally died.

Obviously, all this is in complete opposition to the teaching of the Bible. As we have seen, the Cross is the center of God's redemptive plan. The crucifixion of Christ was prophesied in the Old Testament. Eyewitness accounts of that crucifixion are contained in each of the four Gospels (see 1 Cor. 1:23; 2:2; 15:3,4; Gal. 2:20; 6:12,14; Eph. 2:16).

Jesus predicted His death many times (see Matt. 16:21). Why did He die? As a "ransom for many" (Mark 10:45); He promised that through His shed blood there would be "forgiveness of sins" (Matt. 26:28).

As for Judas, the Gospels tell us that he was the one who betrayed Jesus (see Mark 14:10,11,43-45); and in remorse for what he did, Judas hanged himself (see Matt. 27:5). Judas died at the end of a rope, not on the Cross of Calvary.

Surah 4:111 declares that each person must take care of his or her own sins. The Muslim must earn salvation from sin by following the Five Pillars of the Faith. If he doesn't make it, it's his own fault: "Whoever goes astray, he himself bears the whole responsibility of wandering" (Surah 10:109).

In contrast, the Bible teaches that we all have sinned and gone our own way (see Isa. 53:6). The only way mankind can find forgiveness is through faith in Jesus Christ (see John 3:16; Acts 4:12; Rom. 3:23-26; Eph. 2:4-9).

Mohammed sincerely tried to lead his followers out of idolatry by proclaiming himself a prophet and designing a religion of rules and regulations. Like Judaism, the religion of Islam places on each person a terrible burden of responsibility. But Jesus Christ has

promised to lift such burdens from the human heart: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.... For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matt. 11:28,30).

Loving in the west, oppressive in the east

A distinction needs to be drawn between the friendly image Islam projects in the West as a religion of love, tolerance and justice with the uncompromising nature of Islam as it has consistently been practiced in history and continues to be practiced today, as apolitical religion in the East. Religious leaders of Islamic countries by and large believe that if Islam is to be practiced correctly, all of society must submit to Islamic law (Shariah). This means that everyone in Islamic societies, including non-Muslims, must either conform to Islamic laws, economics, politics and customs or suffer heavy consequences.

Historically, in countries where Islam has gained political power, people of all rival religions are either wiped out or, in the interest of "tolerance" and "open-mindedness," permitted to exist as second-class citizens. As a cultural force, political Islam slowly squeezes non Muslim people and crushes dissent, even though the Qur'an teaches there should be "no compulsion in religion" (Surah 10:99). The regular and continuing persecution of Christians in Muslim countries (which has included rape and murder) occasionally receives media attention. This persecution is part and parcel of political Islam's determination to force people to submit to Allah.

Enslavement of thousands of Black Christians in Sudan by Muslim Arabs is also well documented. The Arab slave masters justify this horrific practice by claiming the Qur'an gives them the right to make slaves out of "infidels".

This is not to say that conditions are the same in every Muslim dominated country. Islamic law is very strict in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Afghanistan; some Muslim countries are more lenient, like Qatar and the United Arab Emirates.

Islam in the West is completely different from Islam in Muslim dominated countries. For one thing, Muslims who live in Western democratic countries enjoy all the benefits and privileges of freedom and democracy. They even have protected legal status as a minority religious group. Their civil liberties are secure; they may practice their religion freely and openly; they may build mosques, print literature, form organizations and associations, start schools, fund media outlets and preach their message from the street corners. Ironically, Muslims living in the United States reap the benefits available in a nation founded on biblical principles.

The black Muslims are American in origin

A distinctly American adaptation of Islam is the Black Muslim movement. In 1913, Timothy Drew, who had changed his name to Noble Drew Ali, taught that Blacks were originally from Morocco (not Ethiopia as many scholars say) and that they had been enslaved by the "Caucasian Devil." Ali called for the overthrow of the tyranny of the White culture. After Ali died in 1919, Wallace Fard Mohammed claimed to be "Ali reincarnated" and formed the Nation of Islam in Detroit in 1930.

Sometime after 1935, Fard disappeared and Elijah Mohammed assumed leadership of the movement. Elijah taught that a mad Black scientist had created Whites, who would rule the earth for 6,000 years. That period ended in 1914, and Blacks were now supposed to unite and bring sanity to the world. The Nation of Islam grew rapidly in the 1960s and 1970s, as Elijah focused on strict discipline and on bettering the education of Black people, while improving their economic and political prospects.

However, in the 1950s and 1960s, a very successful recruiter for the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X, began moving away from Elijah Mohammed's positions and teachings. Malcolm X made a pilgrimage to Mecca where he saw the multiracial character of orthodox (Sunni) Islam and came to believe this was the path to follow. He challenged the leadership of Elijah Mohammed and finally was assassinated by Black Muslims in 1965.

Malcolm X's beliefs, however, did not die with him. By the early 1970s, Black nationalism was disavowed by key Black Muslim leaders, links to orthodox Islam were established and non-Black members were admitted. When Elijah Mohammed died in 1975, his son, Wallace D. Mohammed, took over and relaxed the strict discipline and harsh rhetoric of the Black Muslim movement. He changed the group's name to the American Muslim Mission. This led in the latter 1970s and the 1980s to several breakaway groups, chief of which is led by Louis Farrakhan (born 1933). Believing that Wallace Mohammed's policies were lax, Farrakhan resurrected the Nation of Islam in 1978 and reclaimed the heritage and principles of Black separatism. He has emerged as the most influential leader among the Black Muslim community, but his racist tirades are considered "un-Islamic" by orthodox Muslims."

In the West, whether members of the Nation of Islam or more orthodox Muslim communities, Muslims enjoy numerous freedoms that are unimaginable for Christians in almost all Muslim countries. Why the huge disparity? A large part of the answer is that the West's Judeo-Christian heritage provides a theological foundation for the dignity of each individual's freedom of conscience. In 1,500 years of Islamic history, it has yet to be proven that democratic values and Islam can comfortably coexist.

The key point, however, is that, whether in the East or the West, Islam is a religion of self-reliance and self-effort. Muslims, who are trying to follow a religion that puts the responsibility for their salvation squarely on their own shoulders (or on kismet), can only do their best and hope that Allah might have mercy on them. As people whose confidence is not in themselves but in the God who sent His Son to reconcile them to Him, Christians have incredibly good news to share with Muslims who are willing to listen.

Summing up major differences between Muslims and Christians

- Regarding God: Muslims believe there is no God but Allah; Christians believe that God is revealed in Scripture as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, three persons who are coeternally God (see Matt. 3:13-17; 28:19; 2 Cor. 13:14).
- Regarding Jesus Christ: Muslims believe that Jesus was only a man, a prophet below

Mohammed in importance, who did not die for man's sins; Christians say Christ is the Son of God, the sinless Redeemer who died and rose again for sinful man (see John 1:13,14; 1 Pet. 3:18).

- Regarding sin: Muslims claim that humans are born with hearts that are clean states. if they commit sins, these can be overcome by acts of the will; Christians counter that we are born corrupted by sin, spiritually dead apart from God's grace, and that no one does good apart from faith (see Rom. 3:12; Eph. 5:8-10).
- Regarding salvation: Muslims say that Allah does not love those who do wrong, and each person must earn his or her own salvation; Christians contend that a loving God sent His Son to die for our sins, according to the inspired Word (see Rom. 5:8; 1 Cor. 15:3,4).

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