

Islam and Christianity: An Overview

Being an Apologetic Comparison

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Islam has been in the limelight of global media in the past two decades or so. Its unprecedented media attention has been both good and bad for the world's second largest religion.

The good part is that it has caught the world's attention and dominated the press far dwarfing any other competing religions. Far more people are inquisitive about this religion as to its actual nature, origin and teaching. Many people, Christian theologians included, have taken a keen interest to peer into the Qur'an seeking proper and adequate understanding this complexly diverse religion. A further good side of the media attention is that it has enabled the spread of Islamic ideologies as well as a possibility of making inroads into the previously "closed" domains, especially the western world. With the increase of knowledge, people have easier access to the religion and its practices which were in the past either ignored or simply neglected. There is now a comparative basis for the post modern mind given the pluralistic context. We may say that relatively far more people know about Islam outside the traditionally restricted context of South East Asia, Arabian Peninsula or Asian contexts than hitherto.

However, this large media publicity has generated some bad publicity for the religion because Islam is often (unfairly?) linked to extremism, murder or radical fundamental tendencies which daily occur in the high concentration Islamic contexts though increasingly outside those areas too. There appears to be less tolerance to other faiths (though Islam boasts of its inherent tolerant virtues demonstrated in the Ottoman empire for instance) and ideologies as well as a clear opposition to any external contaminating intrusions. The teaching of the Qur'an is variously interpreted with differing ethical practices or results. To the unschooled non-Islamic person, the religion appears extremely oppressive to all especially women, allows some questionable practices and inflexibly fixed on some of its prescribed beliefs. Unfortunately, no matter how hard one tries to clear or correct these misconceptions, things do not just change, given the 9/11 saga and the relentless *Al-Queda* plots around the world all done in the name of *Allah*. Terrorism, murder, suffering, oppression and to some extent, hatred is strongly associated with the religion. But is that really the case? Is Islam really as

bad a religion as many would like us to believe? A careful and detailed study may actually reveal the opposite in some instances once compared to other faiths. A comparative study and examination of its central tenets may change some one's perception or even harden it. It can go either way. In the quest to promote learning and dialogue, a number of papers, discussions and scholarly articles have been compiled over the years to which the Christian does well to avail themselves. In this paper, we seek to highlight some central tenets of both Christianity and Islam and then proceed to make a conclusion or summary. Our approach is to present our comparison in point form as below:

Identity of Jesus and Muhammad

Jesus is the Messiah, prophet, priest and King in Christianity while in Islam, Muhammad is only a messenger or prophet of God. Despite contra claims, Jesus is the Lord and creator of the world. Muslims reject this view because their scripture points in a different direction claiming that Jesus (*Isa*) was the forerunner of their prophet though no Christian or Hebrew scripture points to that end. The real identities of both men have been questioned believed to be lost to history or superfluous narratives spawned of them to legendary levels. Arthur Jeffrey and the Jesus Seminar have raised these concerns. That said, both men are significant figures in their respective religions, each claiming to be the ultimate to the exclusion of the other more or less.

Trinity and absolute monotheism

In Christianity, God is a triune, consisting of three distinct persons not three gods but one. The Muslim rejects such an interpretation claiming that all this amounts to polytheism, *shirk*. A proper analysis and understanding of Christian scripture points to the fact that God is one and yet in three persons which point the Muslim misses. Muslims hold that God is numerically one and not triune, thus not relational. Allah revolves in an absolutely transcendent orbit, without associates, sons or daughters. Though scholars like Fazlur Rahman claim that *Allah* is personal, the Qu'ranic depiction does not point in that direction.

Qur'an versus Bible

The Bible or Qur'an, which is the true word of God? Respective pundits claim either side of the coin but which is the oldest and consistent with the Hebrew Scriptures? On many scores, the Christian Bible passes the test while the Qur'an occasionally deviates at a tangent. The Bible adopts the entire Hebrew Bible as is but adds a New Testament or gospels. The Qur'an is a little different adopting only selected parts of both, with several points of departure. It seems to imitate both the Hebrew (i.e. *Tawrat*) and Christian gospels (*Injil*) with significant

doctrinal modifications as well as additional narratives whose unclear source is concerning. That said, the Qur'an has its own unique character and goals.

Complete scripture

Each religion has a canon it claims to be comprehensively complete and stable. The standard Qur'an generally has 113 Surahs while the Bible has sixty six books. Their arrangements may differ in each corpus but the basic number remains stable. Muslims accuse Christians of having different canons with at least seven extra books in the Old Testament (Roman Catholic edition) with some books expunged from the text of spuriously eliminated. They make much of this while boasting that the Qur'an has never changed, not even a stroke, letter or word. The *Mushaf* is virtually intact, as it were, so they proudly assert. Furthermore, Muslims claim that the Qur'an is complete with nothing missing or excluded unlike the corrupted Christian Bible. This is hardly true because some two Surahs (including one on adultery) are missing and editions have taken place over time. The number of Surahs in the cannon has varied between 111 to 116 for various reasons including perhaps the missing Surahs. Reasons unclear. We briefly demonstrate our claim: *Hafsa* (and possibly edited) had a text, *Ibn Masud* had a unique corpus while *Hajjaj* instituted some eleven changes to the text (Cook 2000) not to mention the *Uthmanic* text standardization eliminating other readings. Then there are the Satanic verses where the Prophet is said to have been misled (Ahmed 2017). It is alleged that texts do not have these troubling verses though the early Muslims believed and accepted these crane Surahs, according to Ahmed's Princeton University PhD thesis. That said, Dr Brubakker has done some extensive studies on the claimed original manuscripts giving 20 examples of such changes. Dr Jay Smith is a Polemicist to consider consulting on Islam. So, the claim of completeness, inerrancy, non-contradiction does not really hold for the Qur'an.

Bible corrupted (*Tafsir*) or not?

Muslims claim that the Bible, especially the gospels (*Injil*) has been grossly corrupted by the early Christians and that is why Muhammad came to correct the situation. The Muslims thus have a totally different concept of *Isa* because their gospel script is different from the authentic Greek texts whose abundant evidence is there to prove the truthfulness of the text. In our view, this is a deliberate ploy to discredit the Bible.

Contradictions in the Bible and Qur'an

The Bible and Qur'an are both said to harbour some inherent apparent contradictions though pundits from either side deny this to be fact. They claim

that one must know the context and follow the correct hermeneutical interpretive mode if to arrive at a proper understanding and truth. For instance, there are several contradicting copies of the Qur'an (though Muslims deny this claiming these are mere recensions- at least 7 of them) in different locations of the world (e.g. the Cairo edition; *Hafs or Warsh* versions) while some figures in the Bible appear to be inconsistent. Whatever one takes, they must bear in mind the correct interpretive approach.

Inspiration

The Bible and Qur'an both claim inspiration. Both are said to be inspired by God though the mode of inspiration and the number of inspired writers/revealers differs. The entire Bible is said to have been written by over 40 different authors over a period of 1500 years via verbal and plenary inspiration while the Qur'an was intermittently mechanically revealed (*wahi*) to one person (Muhammad) over a period of 23 years. The mode and approach to inspiration differs and thus authority. For instance, the Qur'an was given in intermittent visions, written on different materials until compiled into one by a *Zaid* about AD 644 or later.

Predestination and fatalism

Islam holds some high views of God some of which lead to a fatalistic concept and world view. One of them is Predestination which teaches that whatever comes to pass has been predetermined by God, cannot be changed, altered or challenged. This leads to all sorts of fatalistic tendencies. But this is hardly what the Bible teaches. God is love and does all things well for His people. Although the Bible talks about some form of predestination, it is certainly not what Islam teaches or holds.

Salvation by grace or works

In Islam, salvation depends on doing certain prescribed works or routine rituals such as profession of faith (*Shahada*) praying (*salat*), fasting (*swam*), almsgiving (*zakat*) or pilgrimage (*hajj*) to Mecca while Christianity offers a salvation full and free through faith alone. The grace of God is the unmerited favour a Christian appropriates when they believe in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour.

Was Jesus Crucified or Not?

Jesus was indeed Crucified on the cross and died. There is abundant biblical evidence to attest to this factual claim and yet the Qur'an rejects this truth claiming that a look alike of Jesus was killed instead while he escaped to another

place (substitution theory). Another school claims that while he was crucified, he did not die but just fainted and resuscitated in the grave and walked away (swoon theory). But authentic Christian scripture repeatedly attests to the fact that he really died, including the contemporary, though unconverted, Jewish historian Josephus. Muslims summon the spurious gospels of Barnabas (most likely a 17th century fraud) and Thomas to cement their case. To their loss, these books contradict Muslim theology, no wonder some indigenous (not Western orientalist) modern Islamic scholars do not advise their use.

Divinity of Christ

Jesus has a duo (i.e. hypostatic) nature, both God and man. This is revealed in scripture collectively and by Jesus' own claims. Islam however rejects these claims pointing to a gospel written by non-believing Jews that Jesus was a mere man who never claimed divinity. These are most likely sources Muhammad consulted to come up with the Qur'an.

The Atonement

The Christian faith hinges on the atonement of Jesus Christ wrought on the cross by virtue of his vicarious substitutionary death. In Islam however, the atonement is a foreign concept, rejected and not accepted partly because they hold that Jesus did not die on a cross. This doctrine is abhorred by the Muslims on that score, accusing Paul the apostle as having fabricated this teaching.

Men and Women status

In the Bible, Men and women are considered of equal worth and status because there is neither Jew nor Gentile, male or female before God. What differ may be their roles by virtue of their constitution and strengths but both are acceptable before God. In Islam however, women appear inferior and second rate to their male folk. This is evident from the utterances, marriage, liberty, treatment, value or inheritance issues.

Adultery and other vices

Adultery is forbidden in both religions though Christianity appears stricter because the Lord Jesus states that mere looking at a woman lustfully constitutes adultery while Islam concentrates on the very act. Although the "Christian West" appears permissive, immoral and wicked, the truth of the matter is that very few genuine believers exist there now, hence the rot. It is therefore wrong to claim that Christianity is permissive and evil.

“God is love”

The concept of God being love is pivotal to the Christian faith but is foreign to Islam. This is because the Islamic deity is impersonal and never relates to his creatures except through secondary means. This alone, is what overwhelms a convert to Christianity, the love of a personal God!

Prayer and fasting

Prayer and fasting are mandatory for salvation and practice in Islam while this may not be in Christianity as a means of salvation. Rather, the Christian engages in prayer and fasting to have a closer walk with the divine or communicate with him. In Islam, Ramadan which is the extended time of fasting or visit to some holy site is absent in authentic Christianity. Jesus' tomb is empty because he rose from the dead, so no need for pilgrimage!

Foods

Islam holds that certain foods must not be eaten (i.e. *Haram*) while Christianity views that all foods created by God are clean and therefore good for food. Though within the Christian fraternity, there are some disagreements, the Biblical position is that all foods are clean.

Concepts of “God”: Same or different Gods?

The concept of “God” is different in either religion. While Christianity holds that God is Trinitarian, a God of love, personal, relational, mercy and justice, Islam holds that God is impersonal, non-relational, though merciful certainly but not of love. The concept of love appears foreign to Islam. Clearly, the Islamic God (*Allah*) is different from the Christian God (*Yahweh*) although Muslims staunchly claim that it is the same God. Further, “*Allah*” has pagan origins that were once a chief among deities in the East (around Meccas' *Kaaba*) but Muhammad ensured that He became the only God while all others were outlawed.

Hell and Heaven

Both Christianity and Islam hold that there is a literal Hell and Heaven. This is one of the few points where the two religions share a similar concept.

Conclusion

From the points highlighted above, it is very clear that the Christian and Muslim deities are evidently different contrary to the claims of the latter faith. They differ both in perspective and attributes despite having shared traits. The Muslim holds an inflexible absolute monotheism that staunchly opposes the Trinitarian concept. The Muslim claims that Mohammed is the last prophet sent by God as the periclete though not *paraclete* (Holy Spirit & comforter) six hundred years after Christ to correct errors and deliver God's final revelation. While salvation is by grace through faith alone in the Christian faith, Islam leans towards an uncertain salvation by works. The said religion appears fatalistic and agnostic at the same time because God is impersonal and cannot be known.

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