

Islam's Doctrine of God

Ever since the September 11, 2001, attacks by Muslim terrorists against the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, the question has been raised, "What is the difference between Christianity and Islam?" Many can't see a real difference between these two major world religions. Students of comparative religion in secular universities and colleges are taught that all religions share similar beliefs. They are told that since Christians and Muslims are monotheistic, they worship the same God, even though certain details may differ. And shouldn't different people, in different countries, and from different cultural environments find their own way to God and have a religion suited to their own peculiar circumstances? Does God not welcome all who approach Him through their own history, language, or cultural heritage?

Rabbi David Hartman from the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, asked, "Is single-minded fanaticism a necessity for passion and religious survival, or can we have a multilingual view of God - a notion that God is not exhausted by one religious path?" In reaction to the hatred shown by some to Muslims, there is now a twisted view of religious tolerance, which denies that Islam and Christians are competing faiths. The virtues of Islam, the wisdom of Allah, and the greatness of Muhammad are praised. Ecumenical services are even held with the local imam present. Liberals in mainline denominations declare that to ascribe an absolute finality to Christianity is to express spiritual arrogance.

Some stress that the difference between Islam and Christianity is mainly cultural. But Islam claims to be the only true religion. Muhammad Assad, an Austrian convert to Islam, declares that his faith, unlike other religions, is not only a spiritual attitude of mind, adjustable to different cultural settings, but a self-sufficing orbit of culture and a social system of clearly defined features. In *The Qur'an and Its Impact on Human History*, Allahbukhsh. K. Broth states that in Islam "religion has been perfected. That is another way of saying that with Islam the age of new revelation has come to a close." And he adds, "The Holy Qur'an thus embodies the finalmost communication from the Divine." In other words, the conflict between those two faiths is not just cultural but theological.

Franklin Graham had it right when he said, "The God of Islam is not the same God of the Christian or Judeo-Christian faith. It's a different God." Graham was not intolerant, he simply stated the key difference between Christianity and Islam - the Allah of Islam is not the same as the God of the Bible. True tolerance gives us the right to say, "We think you are wrong, but we will defend your right to hold a wrong view."

The Creed

Islam has the shortest Creed of all religions, and none is so often repeated. Wherever Islam has spread, the ritualistic formula "La Ilaha illa Allah, Muhammad rasul Allah" (There is no god but Allah and Muhammad is Allah's Apostle) is

recited. By this creed the faithful are called to prayer five times daily. It is the very foundation of the Islam faith. Its followers never grow weary of extolling its simplicity. In his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* the British historian Edward Gibbon (1737-94) describes Islam with subdued admiration, just because its creed is so simple compared to the Christological doctrines he had to deal with in previous sections of his book. He even said, "A philosophical atheist might subscribe to the popular creed of Mahometans, a creed too sublime for our present faculties." But as the Dutch missiologist Dr. H. Kraemer points out, "The truly remarkable and puzzling thing in Islam, however, is that it is, notwithstanding its undeniable simplicity, a manifold riddle." But the creed and its theological and practical implications must be understood if we want to present the Gospel to Muslims.

The Divine Oneness

At the core of its creed is the doctrine of the Oneness of Allah. The Koran denies that God has any partner or companion associated with him. It confesses God's unity and sole Oneness. On the surface, this doctrine means two things: there is only one, true God and all pagan gods are false; second, Allah is not trinitarian. Consequently, this confession shows that the Islamic concept of God is a rejection of the Biblical revelation of God. For example, the belief in the Divine Oneness finds expression in a visible demonstration in Mecca. When a Muslim arrives in Mecca for his pilgrimage, he must walk seven times around the Ka'bah (A cubical stone building in the court of the mosque in Mecca that is called the "House of God".)

Muhammad Assad notes that if we move in a circle around some object we thereby establish that object as the central point of our action. And he adds "The Ka' ab, towards which every Muslim turns his face in prayer, symbolizes the Oneness of God." One contemporary Muslim writer describes the Islamic view of God this way: "In attempting to understand the nature and works of God, we learn that: God is only One without a partner or son. He is the Creator of the universe and everything that is to be found in the universe. He is the Compassionate and Merciful and His mercy is to all creatures."

The Trinity

Christians acknowledge the Trinitarian character of God. This is made necessary by our insistence that the God who redeemed the world through the cross is not different from the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and the prophets. We have access to the Father through the Son in the Spirit (Eph.2:18)

Islam plainly contradicts then the core truth of the Christian faith - the Fatherhood of God, and the Sonship of Jesus Christ, Who is also Saviour and King, and the person and work of the Holy Spirit. The Koran states: "O people of the Scripture: do not exaggerate in your religion nor utter aught concerning Allah save the truth. The Messiah, Jesus, son of the Mary was only a messenger of Allah, and his word which he conveyed unto Mary, and a spirit from him. So believe in Allah and his messengers, and say not `Three' - Cease! (it is) better for you! Allah is only One God. Far it is removed

from his transcendent majesty that he would have a son. His is all that is in heaven and that is in the earth. And Allah is sufficient as defender." (Surah iv: 17).

The Sin of Shirk

The doctrine of Trinity is a difficult obstacle in the presentation of the Gospel. Because of its uncompromising emphasis on God's absolute unity, Islam calls the unpardonable sin - the giving of an associate or partner to God.

When a Christian talks to Muslims about the Triune God, a knowledgeable Muslim will immediately reply, "You have committed the worst possible sin; the sin of shirk. You have given God an associate. You placed another beside Allah. You are on the way to hell unless you repent of that horrible sin." And the Koran declares, "Lo! Alah pardoneth not that partners should be ascribed unto him. He pardoneth all save that to whom He will. Whoso ascribeth partners unto Allah hath wandered far astray." (Surah iv 116).

The Cross

At the centre of the Christian faith is the cross of Christ. Christians betray themselves and the Gospel when in a spirit of twisted tolerance and pluralism they act as if the Cross of Christ is incidental to the being of God. In fact, the God we worship cannot be known apart from Christ and His cross. The Christian faith is about the God who had entered into human suffering in Christ and whose righteousness was revealed, not in his judging, but in his justifying man and making him righteous.

Muhammad Assad teaches that there is no universal redemption of mankind in the teachings of Islam. "Redemption and damnation are individual. Every Muslim is his own redeemer; he bears all possibilities of spiritual success and failure in his heart." He quotes the Koran, "Allah taketh not a soul beyond its scope. For it (is only) that which it hath earned, and against it (only) that which it has deserved." (ii:286) And another verses says, "And that man hath only that for which he maketh an effort."(liii:39) What stands between Islam and the Christian faith is the cross of Christ. The apostle Paul said., "The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." (1 Cor. 1:18) The post September 11 Christians' relations with Islam can not change. We cannot participate in ecumenical services with Muslims, followers of Muhammad, an opponent of the Gospel.

Autocratic Will

Allah is the source of both good and evil. His will is supreme. Whom he wills he forgives and whom he wills, he punishes. He acknowledges no rule, standard, or limit except His own rule and absolute will. "As He wills it" is the constantly recurring expression in the Koran. Allah is not bound by law, covenant, or moral code.

A Christian can say, "I stand on the promises of God.. He is faithful in keeping his promises." The Muslim can never say this. Because Allah cannot be held accountable

by people for his claims and promises. He is arbitrary and unpredictable. A Muslim can never be sure of his eternal destiny. Allah rewards or condemns at will.

He has also a free range to change his laws as he pleases. The Koran declares, "Such of Our revelations as We abrogate or cause to be forgotten, we bring (in place) one better or the like thereof. Knowest thou not that Allah is Able to do all things?" (ii: 106). He is ever more prone to punish than to reward, to inflict pain than to bestow pleasure, to ruin than build.

For the Muslim Allah's contradictory actions are not problematic. His will is beyond understanding. Kenneth Gragg comments, " So God is the One Who leads astray, as well as the One Who guides. He is the One Who brings damage, as also does Satan. He is described also by terms like the Bringerdown, the Compeller, or Tyrant, the Haughty - all of which, when used of men, have an evil sense. In the Unity of the single will, however, these descriptions co-exist with those that relate to mercy, compassion and glory."

Submission

Islam has been called a religion which has almost no questions and no answers. The name Islam itself exemplifies its spirit: Islam - absolute surrender to the Almighty Allah, who has not revealed himself, but rather who has revealed his desires, wishes, and will. And his will, according to Islam teaching, is limited to Islamic law. It is the religion of complete and absolute submission. The Koran states, "Say: Lo! The guidance of Allah is Guidance, and we are ordered to surrender to the Lord of the Worlds."(vi:71).

Muhammad Assad points out that as long as a Muslim sincerely and consciously submits to the laws decreed by God, he is free to shape his personal life to whatever form his nature directs him. A Muslim then performs the will of Allah when he follows the dictates of the Islamic legal system. He is Allah's slave but not his child.

Personal Relationship with Allah

Another question is: "Is it possible for a Muslim to have a personal relationship with Allah?" He can never come to know Allah intimately. Allah is not involved in his affairs. He is too far away for him to have intimate fellowship with his follower. To be a Muslim means belonging to a religious - political community rather than an expression of a personal faith. In Islam God then is the Sovereign Monarch who requires his followers to submit to him as obedient slaves. A devout Muslim is entirely absorbed in the greatness and majesty of God while his own person vanishes away.

Prayers in their prescribed forms are more of a continual acknowledgment of God's majesty and sovereignty than of a personal communion. Allah is the wholly other and not our Father. "Fellowship does not exist between God and man," observed Kraemer . "God is too exalted for that and the relation of Father-child between God and man is not

primarily abhorrent to the Moslem because of the association of parenthood and sexual life, but because it suggests a sacrilegious lack of reverence toward the Divine."

Conclusion

In the light of the antithesis between Christianity and Islam, how are we as Christians to communicate the true character of the Triune God? A prerequisite is to know our own faith and to learn about Islam in order to proclaim to them in truth and love the Gospel. A Muslim doesn't know the richness of the love of God in Christ Jesus. But the twice born of God may call Him our Father, and have an experiential relationship with Him. "Those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear; but you received the Spirit who makes you sons. And by him we cry, `Abba, Father.' The Spirit Himself testified with our spirit that we are God's children." (Rom.8: 14-17).