

FAQs

Frequently Asked Questions about Christian-Muslim Relations

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July 2010

I. Christian questions about Muslims

1. How do I relate to Muslims and share my faith? Three things make for fruitful cross-cultural communication. First, relating well to others and sharing your faith is not primarily about methods and knowledge. It is about love; it is about friendship. You will make mistakes. But Scripture says “love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8). Make love your motive and your goal. Second, be a learner. Ask questions about their religion and about cultural practices. What you read in a book may not be true of the person you are getting to know. Finally, be a bridge builder. In the following FAQs we show both the similarities and differences between us. But start with the similarities. Find common ground wherever you can and build on that. *Muslims, Christians and Jesus* by Carl Medearis is an excellent book about bridge building. It should be one of the first books you read about Christian-Muslim relations.

2. Do Muslims worship the same God as we do? Both faiths affirm the one true God, Creator of the heavens and the earth. In the Qur’an, God calls Adam (representing the human race) his trustee, or deputy on earth, in a similar way that Genesis 1 does. The word *Allah* is from the same Semitic root as El (as in Elohim and El-Shaddai) and is the only name for God Arab Christians have used, even before the advent of Islam. He is also the God of Abraham, Moses and Jesus. So when Muslims pray, their prayers are directed to the same “being” we worship -- the one true God, creator of heaven and earth. However, Muslims differ in their understanding of this God. For example, they deny the death, resurrection and Lordship of Christ. They affirm God’s oneness (as we do -- Deut 6:4-5; Mark 12:29-31) but deny the trinity. What Paul said about the Jews is true of Muslims: they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge (Rom 10:2 NIV). If Paul the apostle ministered to Muslims he might say what he said to the Athenians: “what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you” (Acts 17:23 NASB).

3. What do Muslims believe about Jesus? Jesus is mentioned in the Qur’an over 90 times! He is described as the Messiah, the Word of God and the Spirit of God (Q 3:45; 4:171). The Qur’an affirms the virgin birth of Jesus, his sinlessness (at least, he is remarkably pure or holy, Q. 19:19) and his miracles. We have much more in common with Muslims than we do Jews when it comes to our understanding of Jesus. Even his earthly end, which according to mainstream interpretation was to ascend directly to heaven while bypassing the cross, points to the exceptional prophet Muslims have understood him to be. Yet he remains only a prophet—albeit a very special one. Thus according to Islamic theology there is no incarnation, no redemption, no reconciliation.

4. Don't Muslims believe in a distant God, utterly transcendent and remote from human affairs? Muhammad's message to the polytheistic Meccans of his day was that there is only one God (absolutely *One*), and that the greatest sin is to associate anything or anyone with Him (*shirk*). Allah is almighty and transcendent. On the other hand, the Qur'an and the hadiths (sayings of the Prophet and reports of his deeds, which together form the Sunna, or the great example to follow) often tell people to call on God because he is near and desires to answer them. "We are nearer to [man] than his jugular vein" (Q. 50:16). In addition, the mystical tradition in Islam known as "Sufism" stresses a personal relationship with Allah.

5. Though the Qur'an speaks often of God's mercy, isn't God's judgment of each individual on the Last Day based on a person's works? This is true. In fact, Sura 101 uses the metaphor of the scales used to weigh each person's works, either heavy with good works or light for the lack of them. Speaking of each person's actions before God, Sura 6:164 states that no bearer of burdens can bear the burdens of another. Every person will give an account before God for his or her own behavior while on earth. Salvation for Muslims is best captured in the word guidance (*huda/hidaya*): "Lead us in the straight path" (1:6). The Five Pillars – Islam's central rituals – attest to the crucial importance of righteous living: *Shahada* (Witness), *Salat* (ritual prayer), Ramadan fast, *Zakat* (almsgiving) and *Hajj* (Pilgrimage to Mecca).

6. Was the Muslim faith spread by the sword? Mostly no. True, with Muhammad moving to Medina (the Hijrah) in 622, he became both prophet and political leader, and, as head of state, he waged a war against his enemies in Mecca and began expanding the conquest beyond Arabia. On the other hand, on the heels of the breathtakingly rapid conquest of the Persian Empire to the N/E and the majority of the Byzantine Empire to the N/W, little or no effort was made in the first two centuries to convert the populations now subject to Muslim rule (mainly because non-Muslims had to pay a poll tax which was lucrative for the empire). It is estimated that about 120 years after the death of the Prophet only ten percent of the two Muslim empires' population stretching from Spain through Central Asia was Muslim. The great movement of conversion in the following centuries was due to a combination of social pressure, genuine spiritual attraction, occasional shows of force, and, to a large extent (for Africa, South and East Asia) Sufi missionary work.

7. Do Muslims aim to take over the world politically so as to make Shari'a law supreme? If you mean by force, only a small minority does (a fraction of 1%) – those we call terrorists today (al-Qaeda and their associates). This was, however, the official consensus of the legal scholars in Islam's classical period (10th to 13th cent.) who divided the world into the Abode of Islam and the Abode of War. Muslim leaders were expected to lead their armies on a regular basis in order to expand the realm of Islam until, ideally, it covered the whole earth. Since the onset of modernity (and Western colonial rule in Muslim lands), the consensus has dramatically shifted: in today's globalized world of nation-states, international law and democratic rule is taken for granted by the great majority of Muslim scholars and all political leaders. The word *jihad* (meaning striving in the path of God) is understood to mean first of all, striving against one's inner passions in obedience to God, and secondly, fighting a defensive war as a nation-state attacked by another one – a perspective akin to Christian just war theory.

8. Why is Islamic law, or Shari'a, so important to Muslims? Islam's golden age is always seen, in one way or another, as the 10-year rule of Muhammad in Medina (622-632). Though Islamic law as we know it today took some three centuries to emerge after the Prophet's death (with four main Sunni schools of law and two Shia ones), there has always been the presumption that Islam must provide guidelines for every area of life, including the political realm, hence the novel idea of an Islamic state, especially made popular since the 1979 Iranian revolution. Islamic law in practice, however, is mostly relegated to family status law or daily issues that crop up in a changing world. Legal experts, *muftis*, receive questions daily and respond with religious opinions, also known as *fatwas*, in areas as diverse as the raising of children in non-Muslim settings, medical ethics, and interfaith marriages.

9. Why do Muslims worldwide take such a passionate pro-Palestinian stance in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? This is mainly because Jerusalem is Islam's third holiest city, after Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia. The Prophet is said to have been transported there supernaturally (*isra*) and then taken up to the seventh heaven (*mi'raj*), where he met with God personally. It is also because, on the heels of the colonial period, Israel was established in the middle of a historically important Muslim hub and that 750,000 Palestinians became refugees. This ties in with the previous point: with the global resurgence of a more traditional Islam since the stinging defeat of 1967 (Six Day War), the old concept of the Abode of Islam has made a comeback. This means that Palestine in the minds of many ordinary Muslims is Islamic territory, and thus acquires great emotional appeal. So the issue of *jihad* for the sake of Palestine has gained lots of traction among many Muslims internationally.

10. Doesn't the fact that most Muslim women wear some kind of veil show that "Islam oppresses women"? Ever since the great Egyptian reformer, Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905), Muslims have been on a path of reinterpreting the Qur'an in more modern ways. Thus several Qur'anic injunctions have been sidestepped in most Muslim countries – like that of male-only initiated divorce; the testimony of two women in court equaling that of one man; or a woman inheriting half her brother's share. Naturally, there is an ebb and flow to this process, depending on the political circumstances in each nation. There is no more dramatic illustration of this than that of Islamic dress for women and especially the word *hijab*, the headscarf so popular today. Four main factors can be involved: (1) the traditional patriarchal culture of these parts of the world; (2) the recent resurgence of Islamic piety: from the 1980s on, young women started wearing the *hijab*, often against their parents' wishes; (3) depending on the context, the wearing of female Islamic dress (varying in style) might mean a political statement, a statement of identity (like for many Muslims living in the West), or a sign of a deeper religious commitment; (4) wearing a headscarf enables women to enter the work force side by side with men and still be considered modest.

II. Muslim Questions about Christians

1. How can you call yourself a "monotheist" and believe in three Gods? The Qur'an refutes a view of the Trinity that Christians do not hold: 1) it is tritheism (3 gods) and 2) the triad is God,

Mary and Jesus (Q. 4:171; 5:73, 116). In this vein, Christians are seen as committing the unpardonable sin (to associate other beings along with the worship of the Only True God, or *shirk*). In reality, we Christians do not worship three gods but one. The *Shema* of the Hebrew Scriptures was foundational to Israel's theology: "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is One" (Deut 6:4). Jesus also affirmed God's oneness when he quoted the Jewish *Shema* (Mark 12:29). There is a time and place to describe the mystery of the Trinity to our Muslim friends (e.g., Matt 28:19; 1 Cor 8:6; 2 Cor 13:14), but the focus of our sharing should be on Christ, since He is the focus of the New Testament. We can remind our Muslim friends that the mystery of the trinity or trying to explain the complexity of God is not unique to Christians. Muslims believe that God is one and that God's Word is both eternal yet distinct from Him – something very similar to what the apostle John taught in John 1:1. In the end, we must challenge Muslims to look closer at the claims of Jesus in the New Testament and, if the Holy Spirit so leads, to bow before the mystery of God, the Three in One.

For further study on how to explain the Trinity to Muslims see the works of Zachariah Butros and John Gilchrist. (Butros is often too polemical in his treatment of Islam but his paper on the trinity is good).

<http://www.the-good-way.com/en/pdf/en-4101-lit-trinity.pdf>

<http://www.answering-islam.org/Gilchrist/Challenge/chap2.html>

2. The Qur'an states that your scriptures (Jews and Christians) have been "falsified."

What do you say? That notion of falsification (*tahrif*, the strongest of several verbs associated with this accusation against the People of the Book in the Qur'an) is found in four verses (Q. 2:75; 4:46; 5:13; 5:41) and in all cases refers to the Jews of Medina. All the verses imply that the *tahrif* occurred during Muhammad's life and, with regard to what was falsified, three out of four state only words, while only the last one states the word of God (Q. 2:75). Historically, Muslims have been in two camps. Some of the greatest scholars have said that *it was only the meaning of God's word that was falsified* (Ghazali, d. 1111; Baqillani, d. 1013; Razi, d. 1209; Muhammad Abduh, d. 1905). This of course is a reflection of the fact that neither Old nor New Testaments leave any room for another prophet to come, let alone Muhammad. Though there are two passages cited by Muslims to the contrary, their arguments are tenuous at best (Deut. 18:15 and Muhammad as the Praised One instead of the Comforter in John 14-16). The second camp, which is today in the majority, states that *the text of the Bible has been changed*. One way to address this is to state that the Qur'an itself says there is nothing that can alter the words of God (Q. 6:34; 10:64; 18:27). So, theologically, Muslims stand on shaky ground when they allege the second kind of *tahrif*. Scientifically as well, manuscript specialists recognize that the more than 5,000 manuscripts of the New Testament discovered to date amply testify to the text's integrity. Finally, a practical way to approach this issue is to ask your Muslim friends how many of God's holy books they have studied. The nearly universal answer is one, the Qur'an, God's final revelation. You can respond that the Qur'an affirms the former holy books, as does one of the six basic articles of Islamic faith. Then invite them to read the forgotten or neglected holy books of Islam. Getting them to read the Scriptures themselves is one of the most effective ways to witness, since God's word gives wisdom that leads to salvation (2 Tim 3:15).

3. How can you believe in the integrity of the gospel revelation and still have four “gospels”? The Qur’an states that the gospel (*injl*) is one of four books revealed by God from the heavenly preserved tablet (Q. 85:22), or the Mother of the Book (Q. 3:7; 13:29; 43:4). It was brought down (the Qur’anic way of describing revelation) through Jesus and it contained light and guidance (Q. 5:46). The other books, besides the Qur’an, are the Torah, revealed through Moses (Q. 3:93; 6:154) and the *Zabur* (the Psalms) through David. So why do you have four gospels, ask the Muslims. Isn’t this proof that the Scriptures have been changed (*tahrif*)? To answer this we must point to the different conceptions of revelation. The Qur’an is considered a literal dictation by the Angel Gabriel to Muhammad (*tanzil*, or lowering down), whereas the Bible is God’s inspiration through his Holy Spirit working through a variety of men in different times, some of whom were prophets. And then to the four gospels: written in the second half of the first century, three of the authors were disciples of Jesus and the other, Luke the Gentile physician, spent two years in Jerusalem interviewing the elders who had been eyewitnesses of Jesus’ life and ministry. Four complementary witnesses are far better than one!

4. To call Jesus the “Son of God” is the worst kind of sin (*shirk* – associating others with God). Why do you make such claims about Jesus? Jesus has many titles in the Gospel (*Injl*). For example, he is called the Word, Messiah, Son of Man, the Prophet, and the Lamb of God. But the most controversial title for Muslims is the title Son of God. However, the meaning of the term Son of God is very different than most Muslims (and even some Christians) understand by this phrase. Muslims think we believe the term Son of God refers to physical procreation -- God had sexual relations with Mary. However no Christians have ever believed this blasphemy! Rather we understand the term Son of God in a messianic and metaphorical sense.

For excellent articles by Joseph Cumming on this topic: *What is the Meaning of the Expression “Son of God”?* and *The Word of God (Kalam Allah) in Islam and Christianity* see <http://ricklove.net/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/Son-of-God-Joseph-Cumming.pdf>
<http://ricklove.net/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/WordGodIslamChristianity-Joseph-Cumming1.pdf>

See also Chapter 15 "Is Jesus the Son of God?" in Chawkat Moucarry's *The Prophet and the Messiah* for a balanced apologetic.

5. Jesus said, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” How can society become more conformed to God’s will if there is absolute separation of church and state? Muslims, predictably, will tell you that Islam encompasses every area of life, whereas Christians care only about personal faith and relationship with God. Not true. Jesus’ aphorism had to do with paying taxes to a state that was occupying their territory militarily. Even then, he said, taxes had to be paid, but one’s full allegiance was to God, not to any earthly entity. My kingdom is not of this world, Jesus tells the Roman governor, Pilate. As elsewhere in the Bible, followers of Jesus are foreigners and nomads here on earth (Heb. 11:13, NLT). But this does not mean that they do not seek to expand their Lord’s kingdom of peace and righteousness in every possible way (Mat. 6:33). Jesus called his disciples to be the salt of the earth and light of the world (Mat. 5:13, 14). This implies spreading the good news of salvation to people individually, but also caring for the poor, the downtrodden and oppressed, following in their Master’s footsteps. Jesus

summed up his mission in the words of the prophet Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor” (Luke 4:18). In a world torn apart by conflicts and growing gaps between rich and poor, there is much room for Christians and Muslims to link hands and work to care for those in need and help redress systems of injustice. Central to contemporary Islamic theology is the idea that humankind was created by God to be his caliphs on earth or his trustees, or deputies. This divine calling God has on his human creatures is a common spiritual resource Muslims, Jews and Christians can build upon to help change this world in ways that honor God. Part of our preparing the coming kingdom of our Lord Jesus is to preach this good news in word and deed: actively fostering peace, compassion, love and justice.

6. How do Christians protect their women in promiscuous societies? Part of this question relates to the difficulty Muslim immigrant families experience in adapting to American culture, admittedly much more sexually permissive than any Muslim-majority country. Parents worry a great deal about their daughters in a U.S. high school context, where, for instance, boys and girls mix very casually, not to mention school dances and the pressure to date. These are cultural issues difficult to navigate for all immigrants coming from more conservative societies. The other part of this question, however, concerns the issue of modesty, which has only been exacerbated with the resurgence of piety among Muslims in the last 30 years, and especially the wearing of the *hijab* for women. Muslims need to know that modesty is an important virtue in the Bible. The Apostle Paul instructs his protégé Timothy to make sure women in his churches dress modestly, in a way that is appropriate for women who profess to worship God (1 Tim. 2:9). The Apostle Peter, likewise, exhorts Christian women to display a beauty that radiates from the inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit (1 Pet. 3:3, 4). Perhaps we have some lessons to learn from Muslims here.

7. Why don't Christians fast? Christians do fast, depending on the tradition one has in mind. In Egypt, Muslims often comment that Ramadan is an easier fast than the one observed by Coptic Christians (about 40 days before Christmas and 50 before Easter) a strict vegan diet. Jesus assumed that his disciples would fast (Mat. 6:16, When you fast . . .). Many Christians, besides Catholics, observe Lent in various ways. Others set aside days on a voluntary basis in order to fast and pray. It is true, however, that Christians in the West have tended to downplay this spiritual discipline, so central from the beginning.

8. Divisions among Christians are baffling to us Muslims. Can you explain the main differences in simple terms? Christianity --from the word Christ which literally means anointed one -- is a monotheistic religion based on the life and teachings of Jesus the Messiah. The Church established itself in the first century as a group of Jewish and non-Jewish background people who followed the teachings of Jesus, even though they were severely persecuted by the Romans. Then in 313 CE Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity and his Edict of Milan gave official protection to Christianity. Under the protection of the Emperor, Christianity spread rapidly, evolving into the Western churches led by the Pope in Rome and the Eastern churches led by the Bishop of Constantinople. The differences between Western and Eastern churches came to a head in 1054 CE when Pope Leo IX excommunicated the leader of the Eastern Church, dividing the church into Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox. A further division in the Church occurred in 1517 in Germany when a Roman Catholic monk named Martin Luther

protested against some of the practices and teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. This is known as the beginning of Protestantism. Similar reforms started in England and Switzerland, paving the way for the rise of Protestantism. Protestants to this day are further divided into smaller groups called denominations. The Vineyard movement, founded in the early 1980s, is part of the larger Protestant Evangelical movement, which distinguishes itself from Mainstream Protestant denominations (e.g., The United Methodist Church, the Episcopal Church, the Presbyterian Church, USA, etc.) by its high regard for the authority of the Bible and its more active involvement in sharing its faith with non-Christians.

In spite of the divisions and differences among the various branches of Christianity, the Christian church has always affirmed the spiritual unity of everyone who believes in Christ and follows him. All true believers are part of what is often referred to as the church universal.