



Why dialogue about other gods and Jesus?

Misrepresented. It is an ugly word. It represents a great violation of personhood. It is a type of identity theft that has nothing to do with your credit card. It occurs when someone claims to speak or act on your behalf and while doing so says or does something that unfairly represents who you are.

We may also call this idea “slander”. The Apostle Paul said that there should not be slander amongst Christians. And one of the current dangers that the modern Christian church faces is that we too often are quick to believe the worst rumors about our Muslim neighbors. We excuse our lack of compassion toward Muslims by appealing to all that we have “heard” about “them”.

Yes, it is true that we disagree at major points of doctrine—especially over the identity of Jesus the Messiah with Islam. But we realize that Christians do not fight against “flesh and blood, but against principalities, and powers, and rulers...” That being said, this is a critical juncture in human history where the church must realize Muslims are not the enemy—Satan is. And that being said we must realize that much of what we know as the media thrives on controversy, rumors, gossip (ask Britney Spears or Lindsey Lohan), and fear. The danger for Christians is that we would believe the slander put forth toward our Muslim neighbors and in doing so we would begin to fear them, and then to distance ourselves from them, and finally to even hate them.

The Fourth Gospel tells a story about a woman from Samaria. The Samaritans were half Jew, half Gentile. The Samaritans shared a lot of the same teachings with the Jews—but there were major differences in ideas of God, the worship of God, and the Scriptures. It was therefore taboo for a Jew to interact with the polluted Samaritans. Jews were forbidden to eat from a utensil that a Samaritan had used, a Jew could not walk through Samaria for it would pollute him/her, specific laws prohibited a Samaritan from worshiping in Jerusalem. And one never spoke with a Samaritan. The Samaritans were evil; they had different Scriptures, rituals, and yet claimed to worship YHWH.

[Jesus] left Judea and departed again to Galilee. But He needed to go through Samaria. (John 4)

Jesus broke this mold all together when he intentionally went into Samaria, found a Samaritan woman at a well, and told her a story about living water (Read John). This story

reminds us that no matter how much more comfortable the “Us-against-Them” mentality makes us feel the true way of Christ is contact. Contact with the outcast, the other, and even the enemy is the way to dispel slander. If Jesus were walking down the streets of San Francisco and he saw a Muslim woman sitting at a local Starbucks we can only imagine what he might do. I imagine the opening line may begin something like this, “Hello ma’am, would you mind buying me a latte...?”

“...[T]o be a slave to Allah is to be freed from other forms of slavery—ones that are degrading, such as slavery to greed, or to anxiety, or to the desire for personal status.”

1 Huston Smith, *The World’s Religions* (p. 240)

Allah says in the Qur’an (translated):

[2:136] Say (O Muslims): We believe in Allah and that which is revealed to us and that which was revealed to Abraham, and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob, and the tribes, and that which Moses and Jesus received, and that which the prophets received from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and to Him we have surrendered [Arabic “Muslimoon”].

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Introduction to Islam in Two Minutes

Islam was born in a moral vacuum. The prophet Muhammad began to proclaim his message of submission to the one true God—Allah (from al llah meaning “the God”)—to the people of Mecca who participated in polytheistic worship, tribal warfare, sexual orgies, the oppression of the poor, and other gross injustices. Though the first few years of his mission yielded few converts it is now the second largest religion in the world. Muslims respect Mohammad as the greatest and last “seal” of the prophets—none are to come after him.

The religion that we know as Islam today is a monotheistic religion sharing roots with the two other Abrahamic faiths—Judaism and Christianity. Muslims honor the Jewish Torah and Christian Testament as holy books but believe that the al-qur’an (the Koran) superceded the revelations found in those two Scriptures. In fact, the Koran is believed to be the only miracle ever done by Mohammad because Muslims find it hard to believe that a man who was basically illiterate and barely could write his own name if God was not with him. This book is the guide to all Islamic practice and belief. It is the word of Allah to the world and therefore instructs people everywhere in the way of Allah and how to please Allah.

1. “What is the goal of Islam or Christianity?”

Islam literally means “submission”. A Muslim is literally one who surrenders [to Allah].

This is what I have found most impressive about the Islamic faith. In several documentaries that I have watched on the topic—especially Motherland Afghanistan about a doctor in Afghanistan working in some of the harshest circumstances—I have noted how much trust Muslims have in Allah. In one scene found in the aforementioned film a woman has a miscarriage and is crying. And the camera moves over to her husband who tells his wife in compassion, “Do not cry. This is the will of Allah. This is what Allah wanted.” Essentially he was saying: if Allah allowed it than it must be good for us somehow. When I saw this I was convicted about my own sometimes lacking faith.

The goal then is to surrender your complete being to Allah until you are 'a soul at rest' (89:27). Thus the spiritual goal of Islam is to attain this state of peace in the soul.

According to the Qur'an this is the ultimate stage in a man's spiritual development. When he reaches this stage of progress, he qualifies himself to be ushered into Paradise, the perfect and eternal world of the Hereafter. The Qur'an addresses such soul in these words: 'O serene soul! Return to your Lord joyful, and pleasing in His sight. Join My servants and enter My paradise' (89:27-30).

The goal of Christianity is Christ Jesus. The goal is possessing intimacy and relationship with him. It's becoming and identifying with his nature and character. It's spending eternity in his Presence. "You received Christ Jesus, the Master; now live him. . . Everything of God gets expressed in [Christ], so you can see and hear him clearly. You don't need a telescope, a microscope, or a horoscope to realize the fullness of Christ, and the emptiness of the universe without him. When you come to him, that fullness comes together for you, too. His power extends over everything. (Colossians 2). " I [want to] know Christ personally, experience his resurrection power, be a partner in his suffering, and go all the way with him to death itself. . . . Friends, don't get me wrong: By no means do I count myself an expert in all of this, but I've got my eye on the goal, where God is beckoning us onward—to Jesus." (Philippians 3, MSG)

2. "How does the Koran instruct adherents to please God?"

First and foremost Muslims must adhere to the Five Pillars as well as other commandments found in the Koran—but here we will focus on the Five Pillars which are: (1) The Shahadah or the proclamation La ilaha illa 'llah or "There is no God but the God". The second half states, "...and Muhammad is his prophet." This creed signifies loyalty to Allah and trust in the Qur'an that was mediated to the world through Muhammad. (2) The salat or five daily prayer toward Mecca (dawn, noon, afternoon, sunset, and evening). (3) Fasting, or sawm, during the month of Ramadan. Ramadan is of importance because of the hijira—the emigration of Mohammad and his followers from Mecca to Medina when the first persecutions had begun. It is also the month when the first revelation to Muhammad occurred. (4) A mandatory almsgiving to the poor known as zakat. (5) A personal hajj or pilgrimage to Mecca for those whose health and wealth make this a possibility.

3. "How did Jesus teach that people could please God?"

Huston Smith states in his book *The World's Religions* that Muslims believe that had Jesus been around a little longer, or had the Jewish social structures been accepting of Jesus, he would have codified the conduct that he expected his followers to adhere to.

But Jesus entered a world with a code of conduct already in place. Jesus did not come and set up more guidelines for right behavior (though neither did he forsake them). Rather, Jesus boiled down the Jewish Law into two commandments: Love God—heart, soul, mind, strength, and love others—as equally as I love myself. This is very fluid and completely un-

legalistic. It forces us to think. It forces us to seek God for help. It forces us to rely upon the Holy Spirit. In every situation we cannot simply live by the letter of the Law, but by the spirit of the law. That being said, we must approach every situation honestly asking, "How can I love God and others here and now?"

People want codes of conduct, like the teacher who wanted Jesus to give him some guidelines for loving his neighbor. All Jesus did was tell the story about the Good Samaritan and basically left the question hanging in the air for all to ponder.

4. How does one really obey God? What is at the heart of obedience?

Whereas Islam teaches that people are basically good and therefore can do what the will of Allah is if they will adhere to the commandments found in the Qur'an the Christian Gospel says the opposite: we are essentially messed up and even when we want to do what is right we fail to do so.

This does not mean Christianity is not a religion of faith, submission, and obedience to God. We are not anti-nomian (against law). But we realize there must occur a radical change within our being before we can do that which pleases God. This is why the Apostle Paul told Christians to live in the Spirit (Romans 8:4, 5). He wrote that the Spirit makes up for our weakness (Romans 8:26). We are first given the grace of God through faith before we can do these good works. It is by faith in Jesus that God equips us with the indwelling Spirit to empower us toward good works. It is God "working in you to will and do His good pleasure". In other words God does not expect us to rely on ourselves, rather, God indwells us and as we submit to His leading He develops His nature in us!

Key Phrases and Terms

Jihad: "The term jihad is derived from an Arabic word that means "to struggle" or "make an effort" (Prothero, 192). This term is first and foremost referring to an internal spiritual struggle with one's own human nature. The second meaning, and the more well known of the two, is to struggle against outside forces that threaten Islam. Osama bin Laden and others like him take this idea to an extreme.

Qur'an: The "Bible" of Islam. Qur'an literally means "recitation". "Muslims affirm that this scripture was miraculously revealed by Allah via the angel Gabriel to Muhammad, recited by Muhammad, memorized by his companions, written down by scribes, and later compiled onto codex." (Prothero, 215).

Shi'ite: The Shi'ite (lit. "partisans" of Ali) sect believes that after the death of Muhammad that a family member should have been elected as his successor. They wanted to nominate Muhammad's son-in-law Ali. This sect believes that the only authentic leaders of Islam can derive from successor of Muhammad (much like Catholics demands succession from the Apostles via Bishops).

Sufi: A Muslim who is part of the branch known as "Sufism". It is the mystical, spiritual, experience driven sect of Islam.

Sunni: Sunni Islam is the largest sect of Islam. The name derives sunna meaning “custom” or “tradition” in Arabic. The imams have less authority in this sect (it is similar to Protestantism in Christianity) and the central focus is following the Qur’an and the example of Muhammad. Whereas Shi’ite Muslims believed that leaders should be successors of Muhammad, Sunni Muslims believe the ummah or Muslim community should elect leaders.

Sources Used and Recommended Reading

- 1 Azlan, Raza. *No God but God*
- 2 Ernst, Carl W. *Following Muhammad*.
- 3 Hinnells, John †R. ed. *Dictionary of Religions*
- 4 McDermott, Gerald R. *God’s Rivals: Why has God Allowed Different Religions?*
- 5 McDermott, Gerald R. *Can Evangelicals Learn from World Religions? Jesus, Revelation, and Religious Traditions*
- 6 Novak, Philip. *The World’s Wisdom: Sacred Text of the World’s Religions*
- 7 Prothero, Stephen. *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know--and Doesn’t*
- 8 Sells, Michael. *Approaching the Qur’an: The Early Revelations*
- 9 Smart, Ninian. *The World’s Religions*
- 10 Smith, Huston. *The World’s Religions*
- 11 Zacharias, Ravi. *Jesus Among Other Gods*

Questions? Comments?

E-mail Brian LePort at brianleport@gmail.com or visit brianleport.com and participate in the discussion under the title Jesus among the gods: sermon series notes: Islam. Pastor Jeff has a blog as well that you can reference: BelovedDiscipleship.com.

The Kerygma:

Jesus Christ was a man approved of God by miracles, signs and wonders which he did among the people. He was a prophet, the prophet Moses predicted would come. His teachings were radically different, challenging us to love our enemies. His love for all humanity was radically different, he forgave the adulteress, he accepted the con-man Zacchaeus, he invited a thief to share paradise with him. He accepted Samaritans, talked with noonday women of ill repute, touched the untouchable lepers and healed them, commandeered breakers and gales. The human race misunderstood who he was and rejected his divine authority and nature. We rejected him. We crucified him. Yet all of this was part of God’s plan. He used our rejection of him to display his love for us. Our bloodlust only served as a backdrop upon which the power of God redeemed the sinfulness of man. Through our injustice to him, we were made just before God. We didn’t realize who this Jesus was. And still didn’t realize it until three days later his tomb was discovered empty. Two angels sitting in white declared to those who would listen that Jesus was Lord and had risen from the dead. Jesus Christ is alive. His resurrection declares to us that he was no mere mortal. He was God in mortal flesh. Yes we believe in one God. Yes we believe that the Father transcends our scrupulous attempts at understanding God. Isaiah said, “for unto us a Son is born and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

After Sermon discussion Guide

Read the “why dialogue about Jesus and other gods?” (above). Does Jesus allow cultural fears to intimidate him into not talking with a person of another religion? What fears, worries, or thoughts intimidate you into withholding ‘living water’ with someone of a different faith? What do you learn from Jesus?

Read Romans 8 again! But this time focus on how God empowers and guides believers by the indwelling Spirit. What does he promise his indwelling Spirit will do? (Read Acts 1:8).

THINK ABOUT IT

Read Ephesians 2:1-10. “It is by grace you are saved and not of works...” Paul tells us that this fact—that we are saved by grace through faith—is in and of itself a gift of God. God’s plan to save us when we simply trust and follow the Son of God is free and everlasting. How does this truth differ from Islam and other religions?

WHAT WILL YOU DO?

1 Sunday we contrasted obedience-in-faith with obedience-out-of-faith. What do you see as being the difference between the two? How do you change from a performance driven spirituality to a Spirit-led spirituality?

2 The Epistle of James balances out the Pauline emphasis on faith by reminding us that works are the visible manifestation of our faith. Read how James 2:14-18 reminds Christians that good deeds are still essential to the practice of our faith.

3 You have read the story of the woman raped in Saudi Arabia and then receiving Governmental beatings on top of her rape for being alone with men. Or other stories of hateful rejection for community members who do not follow the way of Islam. If you see a follower of Jesus, a brother or sister within your church community not following the teachings of Jesus what if any obligation do you have to that person? Should you talk about them behind their back and warn others about them? Ostracize them from your group? Quit going to church and look for a perfect church to attend? Sit them down and scold, rebuke them? Lovingly and kindly ask them about what they are going through? Pray for them? What would Jesus say about this? (Read Matthew 18:15-20; 1Thessalonians 5:12-15).

CHANGING YOUR MIND

Read Isaiah 64:6. Meditate on how the prophet describes our own human efforts at self-justification are viewed through the eyes of God.