

Can We Welcome Muslims as Fellow Believers in the One God?

Under the banner of religious pluralism, many seem to downplay all real differences among religions. They claim disputes among the different "ways" of salvation are pointless. Christ may be called the one way to the Father, but He is not the only One. Many believe Christians and Muslims worship the same deity. A traditional Japanese saying - "Although the paths to the summit may differ, from the top one sees the same moon" - when applied to religion suggests that, although there are different religious paths, ultimately each way will reach the same destination. Unfortunately, a growing number of Christians have embraced the notion that while the Christian faith is "true" and legitimate for them, other religions can be equally "true" and legitimate options for others in different circumstances. This view makes it difficult to appeal to the Bible, as one's sole authority. It also hinders missions. The Gospel story has become only one among the many stories.

Religious pluralism is not a new experience for the Christian church. As far back as recorded history takes us, there have been different religions and practices. The apostolic Church was launched into a religiously pluralistic world, a world where, as the apostle Paul puts it, there were many gods and many lords (1 Cor. 8:5). The relationship between the Christian faith and other religions was already discussed when the Christian church was no more than a small group, scattered over the whole Roman Empire. The Church knew that the Gospel would not be welcomed with "open arms". The early Church was despised, persecuted, and living in very difficult circumstances. The New Testament clearly states that the normal attitude toward the Christian Church will be one of hostility.

The Way of Islam

Among the religions of the world there is not one that has a shorter creed than Islam and not one whose creed is so well known and so often repeated. The whole system of Muslim theology, philosophy, and religious life is summed up in seven words: "La ilaha illa Allah, Muhammad rasul Allah" (There is no god but Allah and Muhammad is Allah's Apostle). By this creed Muslims are called to prayer five times daily, and it is the platform on which all the warring sects of Islam unite. It is the very foundation of the Islamic religion. In *Islam in Focus*, which was written for "the young and lay readers," and distributed by the Vanguard Islamic Association and the Canadian Islam Congress, Dr. Hammudah Abdalati states that Islam is the universal religion of God, the maker of human nature, who knows what is best for human nature. He says that whoever refuses the confession that Muhammad is the messenger of Allah, refutes the first part of the confession that Allah is God. Islam is the only religion that can be based on the Koran revealed to Muhammad.

Abdalati says that the original founder of Islam is no other than God Himself, and the date of the founding of Islam goes back to the age of Adam. Islam has existed in one form or another all along since the beginning and will continue to exist till the end of time. Every person is born "Muslim". All the characters of the Bible, from Adam to

Abraham, Moses to David, the Hebrew prophets, Mary, Jesus, and the apostles were Muslim prophets who preached Islam, and it is only in their quality as Muslims that they are recognized. Muhammad is the "Seal of the Prophets". Whoever obeys him, obeys Allah (Sura 4:80).

Islam means submission to the will of Allah and obedience to his law. Only through the submission to the will of Allah and by obedience to his law can one achieve true peace and enjoy lasting purity. Therefore, whoever departs from Islam stands outside the true religion and falls victim to "excommunication". Muslims oppose idolatry and do not want to be identified with Christianity, Hinduism or Buddhism or whatever. They believe Islam is unique. It is the only way!

The Koran

For Muslims, the norm is first and foremost the Koran itself. For centuries, Muslims read and memorized the Koran in Arabic as "the language of heaven". And those who can read Arabic call the language of the Koran "divinely beautiful, terrifying, tear-inducing, spine-tingling, mesmerizing," and impossible to imitate. Abdalati notes that it came to Muhammad "through the Heavenly Messenger Gabriel" who was sent down with concrete divine words to convey Allah's message. For Muslims the Koran is the word of Allah. It is the Word of God incarnate, eternal and uncreated. Muslims believe every letter in the Koran is the word of Allah, and every sound in it is the true echo of Allah's voice. Every Muslim must abide by it and reflect on it. Abdalati clearly states the Muslim's conviction that the Koran has the "sole truth." He says that it "is given to the Muslims as the standard or criterion by which all other books are judged." Whatever agrees with the Koran is accepted as divine truth, and whatever differs from the Koran "is either rejected or suspended." The Koran is the only way to Allah. It frequently censures Christians for believing in false doctrines – including beliefs that are central to their faith as it has been understood and practised for as long as six centuries before Muhammad began preaching. Referring to both Jews and Christians, the Koran says, "Allah's curse be on them: how they are deluded away from the Truth" (Surah 9:30).

Salvation by works

The Philippian jailer asked Paul and Silas, "Sirs, what must I to do be saved?" They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved – you and your household" (Acts 16:30,31). A Muslims would answer the jailer's question by saying, "Every Muslim is his own redeemer; he bears all possibilities of spiritual success and failure in his heart." Islam has an optimistic view of human nature. Conspicuously lacking in Islam are concepts of the radical depravity of human nature, the pervasive impact of sin and the complete inability of mankind to redeem itself from the bondage of sin. Sin is considered more a weakness, a defect or imperfection rather than a radical corruption of the nature and the will. Human beings are born without sin. Abdalati declares that every person is born free from sin and all claims to inherited virtue. "He is like a blank book." Each person must bear his own burden and be responsible for his own actions. "Consequently, the Muslim cannot entertain the story of Jesus' death on the cross just

to do away with all human sins once and for all." In other words, Muslims believe there is no need for a Saviour and Redeemer.

Islam is a legalistic religion, insofar as it stresses the law of Allah, which every believer must observe wholeheartedly. Obedience to the law is something that is held to be within the grasp of disciplined and religiously sensitive persons. In other words, Islam seeks self-salvation. Muslims believe that man must work out his salvation through the guidance of God. The Koran says, "Who so makes effort to follow in Our ways, We will *guide* them: for God is assuredly with those who do righteous deeds" (Surah 29:69). The Koran teaches that there definitely will be compensation and reward for the good deeds, and punishment for the evil ones. On the Day of Judgment there will be a final settlement of all accounts.

The Jesus of Islam

Today we increasingly hear and read that Christianity and Islam "share" Jesus, that He belongs to both religions. Jesus asked His disciples, "Who do you say I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:15,16). Christians think of God in terms of Christ.

The opposite is true for Muslims. If you asked them, "Who do you say Jesus is?" They would answer, "Isa was a prophet of Islam. His true name according to the Koran was Isa. His message was pure Islam, surrender to Allah. He was a lawgiver." Isa was simply a created human being and a slave of Allah. Muslims claim that Isa's mother was Mariam. While still a virgin Mariam gave birth to "Isa alone in a desolate place under a date palm tree" (not in Bethlehem). He did not die on the cross but ascended to Allah. On the day of the Resurrection, "Isa himself will be a witness against Jews and Christians for believing in his death."

The Koran expressly denies the divinity of Christ. Islam has always looked upon Jesus as one of their greatest prophets. Abdalati states that all prophets of God, *including Jesus*, and their faithful followers were Muslims, and their religion was Islam, the only true universal religion of God. Islam commands Christians not to believe that "Isa is the Son of God." At the last judgement he will condemn Christians to hell for believing in the crucifixion and the incarnation. By Islamicising Jesus, and making him a Muslim prophet who preaches the Koran, Islam destroys Christianity and takes over all its history. But the Isa of the Koran is based on no recognized form of historical evidence, but on fables current in seventh-century Arabia. The Koran is oblivious to the real contents of the Bible. The identity of Jesus Christ reveals the unbridgeable gap between Islam and Christianity. Both cannot be correct.

Islam and the Trinity

The church confesses the Trinity. This doctrine is not an appendix to the Christian faith. It is at the heart of the Christian faith, but Islam denies it. Allah has neither an associate nor equal. The corner stone of Muhammad's message was the absolute unity and

sovereignty of God. The famous Islamic scholar al-Ghazzali (1058-1111) said about Allah, "as touching His essence, He maketh known that He is one, and hath no partner." Abdalati teaches that Allah has no partner or son, and neither gives birth, nor is He born. He is eternally besought by all and has not beginning or end, and none is equal to Him (Surah 112:1-5). There is only one God for Muslims, and he is the same God for all peoples. It is due to this uncompromising emphasis on God's absolute unity that in Islam the greatest of all sins is the sin of *shirk*, or assigning partners to God (Surah 4:116). The Koran clearly shows that Allah is not the same as the Triune God of the Bible. We are talking about a different God. The Triune God is different from all other gods. Only He has the answer to the question, "Who can save men and women from their lost condition?" The Triune God is the God of love. The love of God the Father is evident by giving His Son. The love of the Son is evident by His acceptance of death on the cross. Herman Bavinck comments that Christ was not a new legislator but the Saviour. "Christ did not come only to restore the ethical-religious life of man, and to leave all the rest untouched as though this had not been corrupted by sin and did not stand in need of restoration. No, the love of God, the grace of the Son and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit extend as far as sin."

The Jesus of the Scriptures

Who is Jesus? The Christian believes in Jesus Christ as the Seal of the Prophets, as priest, king and the only begotten Son of the Father, and therefore as God. J.H. Bavinck notes, "God is different, totally different, from the way we human beings have imagined Him in our religious fantasies. In Jesus Christ alone, the *Logos*, the Word, we hear His voice and see His image." Scripture presents Jesus as the Creator and preserver of the universe, as the incarnate, crucified and Risen Redeemer and living Renewer of his people. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End; the entire eternal order is grounded in Christ. Carl F. Henry remarks, "If therefore Christianity neglects Christ's divinity, it invites its own dissolution. The fact of his divinity is vital, among other things, to the debate over whether Christians, Jews and Moslems worship one and the same God." God is, therefore, defined in terms of Jesus Christ.

The Gospel is not about Jesus discovering the way and the truth, and that if we follow His teaching we too can find the way ourselves. The apostle Paul says that not even apostolic status, not even angelic existence, stand above the unchanging gospel. Paul argues for the centrality of the cross. It is the only way of salvation for guilty sinners - justification comes to guilty men and women exclusively on the ground of the grace of God in the cross (Gal.1:8-9). Salvation means, therefore, that the guilt that rested on human beings and made them God's enemy has been taken away by the wholly mysterious event of the suffering and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ: "Being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:1). And salvation also includes the restoration of creation, the new heaven and earth. Christ does not stand at the beginning but in the midst of history, the event of His death, resurrection and ascension. Islam denies Jesus' death; Christians glory in it. No one is reconciled to God except through the cross of Jesus Christ. Lesslie Newbigin comments, "The cross is the place where the decisive battle between Christ and sin

took place, where the powers of Satan brought all their strength to the attack, and where they were defeated." On the cross, Christ overcame the enmity between races and nations and those who believe in Him are made into one nation (Eph. 2:11-18). All persons, unless saved by God's grace, face God's just wrath and eternal condemnation for sin (John 3:36). Therefore, we must bear witness to Christ wherever we are. Our Lord gave us the responsibility to proclaim this unique Gospel of reconciliation. And it was precisely this uncompromising exclusivism of the early Christians that provoked the antagonism of the surrounding culture.

Jesus said, I am *the Way, the Truth, and the Life*. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). In *The Biblical Notion of the Kingdom*, Johannes Verkuyl comments, "The way of the Cross as the way of reconciliation between God and people may never be muted in interreligious encounter in a misguided attempt 'to give no offense.' The paramountcy of Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Lord, may never be called into question. He may never be shunted aside, never be deposed from his position as the only Way leading to God's Kingdom. In no way can we speak about God apart from Jesus Christ. Jesus states that anyone who has seen Him has seen the Father (John 14:9). In identifying Himself with the I AM of Exodus 3:14, Jesus identified Himself with God (John 8:58). Paul claims that all of the "fullness" of God is present in Jesus (Col. 1:19, 2:9). One of the remarkable passages identifying Jesus with Yahweh, the one eternal God is Phil. 2:5-11. It affirms Christ's pre-existence and essential equality with God. Despite His death of shame on the cross, Jesus did not remain in death but ascended to heaven to sit at the right hand of God the Father. Christ is the One, writes the author of Hebrews, of whom the ancient prophets spoke, through whom God spoke in person in the days of his flesh, who even now upholds the universe by his powerful word and who is divinely designated heir of all things (Heb. 1:1-3).

The Radical Difference between Islam and Christianity

Christians, who hold that salvation is available only through Jesus Christ, and that sincere Muslims are mistaken in their basic beliefs, are routinely dismissed as intolerant. Although the Christian faith is one of several world religions, this does not mean to imply that they are more or less identical and rooted in the same soil. These religions are radically different from each other. Islam seeks salvation through obedience to the law, Christians believe that "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life" (John 3:16).

Islam claims to be the only true revelation and pathway to God. But not all revelations can be equally true, equally right, equally good. Insofar as other religions actually contradict the revelation of God in Scripture, we claim that these religions are not true revelations at all, the Koran included. The Bible serves Christianity as its normative standard. God's revelation thinks of other religions as forms of idolatry. Paul's assessment of the idolatrous religions of his time is true for our own generation. He says, "Since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone – an image made by man's design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent"

(Acts 17:29,30). In *The Church Between Temple and Mosque*, J.H. Bavinck comments, "Man seeks God and the same time he is busy obscuring the image he receives of God's everlasting power and deity.....Through this fear and this feeling of guilt he represses the image of God and replaces it by his own ideas."

A genuinely Biblical perspective on other religions should recognize that much religious activity and belief is influenced by the adversary, Satan (1 Cor. 10:20). Scripture speaks of those who are not yet saved as "spiritually blind" and under the power of the "god of this age" (2 Cor. 4:4; Eph. 4:17-18). The sphere of religion is the battlefield par excellence for the demonic. We neglect this fact to our peril as we witness to Muslims of the saving grace of our Triune God. We must be firmly rooted in the life of the Church, in Scripture, in the creeds and confession of the church if we want to engage the world of Islam for Christ. And Newbigin rightly notes, "It is only by being deeply rooted in Christ that one can enter in complete self-emptying and with complete exposure into this world in order to bear faithful witness to Christ."

Johan D. Tangelder
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