

Exploring Islam in the Light of Scripture (7)

Do Muslims and Christians worship the same God? Is there not an element of truth in non-Christian religions? Do not all religions lead in their own way to the same destination? The possibility that one religion in principle can be different from other religions is not even considered. How can anyone in this day and age still speak of Jesus Christ as the only way of salvation? How can anyone prove whether the Gospel is true? These questions are understandable in the light of the powerful influences of secularism, skepticism and religious relativism in our time. Yet we should be *impatient* with all the talk about Muslims and Christians worshipping the same God. The latter would mean that we have something in common with people who believe in the Allah of Islam and worship him as we worship our God.

Every time theologians and missiologists take their point of departure from the religious human beings instead of God's revelation, they will find some common ground in other religions and Christianity. But there is no common ground. To say we worship the same God as Islam is denying the Triune God. "Other religions," Dr. H. Kraemer contends - despite all the goodness that can be described in them, up to and including 'footmarks of god' - are "in terms of their deepest and most essential intention and meaning miscarriages of truth."

Universalist Tendencies

To raise the question whether Islam worships the same God as Christians has become a very sensitive question in our dangerous times. Yet the question must be addressed. How do we answer it? There is a range of positions concerning the identity of "God" in Islam and Christianity. A massive report, *Re-thinking Missions: A Layman's Inquiry after One Hundred Years*, published in 1932 by a Commission of Appraisal representing seven American Protestant denominations, concluded that the stress upon the uniqueness of Jesus and the absoluteness of his message is no longer necessary. As one historian of mission summarized the position of *Re-Thinking Missions*, "The task of the missionary today, it was maintained, is to see the best in other religions, to help the adherents of those religions to discover, or to rediscover, all that is best in their own traditions. The aim should not be conversion - the drawing of members of one religious faith into another or attempt a Christian monopoly."

Karl Rahner, one of the most influential theologians of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) spoke of "anonymous Christians." He implied with this controversial concept that all human beings can experience the reality of grace through human acts of knowing, willing, and loving. In practice, it meant calling all persons of good will brothers and sisters in Christ's love. On October 1965, the *Declaration of the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions of the Second Vatican Council* was published. It stated, "The Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in those religions [primitive religion, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam]. She looks with sincere respect upon those ways of conduct and of life, those rules and teachings which, though differing in many particulars from what she holds forth, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that Truth

which enlightens all men" (John 1:9). The Council also declared: "Upon the Moslems, too, the Church looks with esteem. They adore one God, living and enduring, merciful and all-powerful, Maker of heaven and earth and Speaker to men. They strive to submit wholeheartedly even to His inscrutable decrees, just as did Abraham, with whom the Islamic faith is pleased to associate itself." In 1970, a joint agreement between the Vatican Secretariat of Non-Christians and a delegation of the Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs declared to "do everything possible to develop good relations between Christians and Moslems, in order to strengthen the fraternity existing among believers who respect all religious values and faith in God." Differences of opinion can also be found among evangelicals. The prominent evangelical scholar and missionary Phil Parshall suggests that "Islam presents an inadequate and incomplete - but not totally misguided - view of God."

General Revelation

How do we account for the universal fact that there is a sense of God in mankind? And why is there a universal sense of right and wrong? The first chapter of Romans says that God has given this external knowledge of Himself in nature, in creation (See Ps. 147, Acts 14:15-17). The apostle Paul says that this knowledge of God is available to all. But what happened to this universal knowledge of God? This knowledge of God is always immediately smothered and corrupted. The Biblical narrative shows that mankind has fallen away from that knowledge, and that its tendency has been to sink lower and lower and further away from it. Human religious feeling is a clear manifestation of a sense of human sinfulness and a hunger for redemption.

Having given up God, people do not cease to be religious, they do not cease to worship. They make other gods for themselves and then proceed to worship them. They have set up their own ideas of God and their own philosophies in the place of Biblical revelation. They have tried to construct new religions, including Islam. They have ordered and lived their lives according to their ideas, not the Triune God's. Every religion is in principle a change of the truth into a lie (Rom. 1:25), and there is therefore "an unbridgeable gap between all non-Christian religions and the gospel." We may stand in awe of nature's God, but this awe does not save us. People are constantly attempting to flee from Him, and trying to escape His grasp.

Coming to the truth is a religious matter: "People loved darkness instead of light" (John 3:19). They rebel against God as He is and as He reveals Himself. They "suppress the truth by their wickedness" (Rom. 1: 8). And general revelation does not save. People are not reached by general revelation apart from the working of the Spirit. According to 1 Cor. 2:14, 15, it is the Holy Spirit who makes the revelation in Christ known to people. The Holy Spirit awakens in man that deeply hidden awareness of guilt. The path to eternal life is not Islam. There is only one hope - it is this gospel, "the light of the knowledge of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:4-6). Anyone who views God differently from the way He has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ, does not merely have a different view of God but has most profoundly another God.

The Trinity

With the Muslims, we believe in the oneness of God. With the *Nicene Creed* we confess: "We believe in one God, Maker of heaven and earth and of all that is - visible and invisible." And with the same creed we confess that through the one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, "all things were made" (John 1:10 Cf.). In his *Confessions*, Augustine asked, "How, O God, didst thou make heaven and earth?" The answer? It was the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ, through whom the heavens and earth were made. In other words, the God we worship is totally different from the Allah in Islam. Remember that we are not simply men and women who believe in God; we believe in the blessed Holy Trinity - we believe in the Triune God. This doctrine of the Trinity is the heart of Christianity. It is this truth that makes the whole gospel unique. There are other religions that believe in God, but there is not another that preaches and teaches the doctrine of the Trinity. It is the touchstone of truly orthodox faith and teaching. In other words, not all religions, including Islam, have equal merit. That's why the Church goes into the world in obedience to our Lord's Great Commission. Dr. J. H. Bavinck reminds us that mission is and remains a task given by God to the church, "to proclaim with holy joy, in the midst of a world in the grip of the evil one, the call to confession of sins and conversion, the call also to faith in Jesus Christ."

(To be concluded)

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