

COMPANION GUIDE
TO THE VIDEO SERIES

Christianity
AND
إسلام

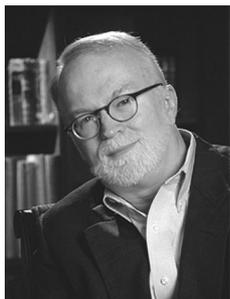
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Christianity and Islam

Dr. Timothy George, founding dean of Beeson Divinity School of Samford University, Alabama, is the program presenter. These videos are based on Dr. George's book "Is the Father of Jesus the God of Muhammad."

Introduction

In our modern world, the very word "Islam," which means "submission," can evoke an array of emotions and feelings for most Christians. Anger, mistrust, and defensiveness are just a few. After all, aren't Muslims and their "holy wars" the cause of much of the world's suffering? How are we as Christians to respond to those who hold to a religion so very different from and contradictory to our own? Should we be on the defensive, trying to protect our families and beliefs from those whom we fear may try to harm us? Should we strive for peace, living together in the same communities with those who are so different, but not really interacting? Or should we endeavor to dialog, trying to share our beliefs with the hope of convincing Muslims that Jesus is the Messiah?

With this video and study guide we hope to accomplish a few things. We trust that through this series, you will gain a fuller understanding of the Muslim faith. You will see how this religion originated and what its basic tenets are. In so doing, you will gain a richer understanding of Christianity. You will see where the two faiths overlap in beliefs and where they differ. It is our hope that through this process you will be able to develop your own view of an appropriate Christian response to Islam.

The questions you will find throughout this study guide are designed to promote thoughtful discussion within your group. Don't look for an answer key in the back, as most questions have no right or wrong answer. Please feel free to photocopy question pages for use in your class if you find that students share better after having time to think about and write their responses.

Before You Begin

These suggested Pre-Session Questions can help you to prepare for the material that follows. They are designed to explore our knowledge and misunderstandings of Islam:

1. List three adjectives you would use to describe Muslims.
2. What core beliefs do you associate with Muslims?
3. What religious practices do you associate with Muslims?
4. Who was Muhammad?
5. When and where did Muhammad live?
6. What is the Qur'an and where did it come from?
7. Do Muslims worship the same God as Christians?
8. T or F: Thirty-five percent of Muslims live in the Middle East?
9. T or F: Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world?
10. T or F: Do you have Muslims in your neighborhood, your workplace and your public school?
11. Have you made attempts at sharing your faith with Muslims in the past? Describe that experience. How was it different than witnessing to agnostics?

Episode One: The Tenets of Islam

In this episode Dr. George reviews the Five Basic Tenets of Islam and the Five Pillars of Islam. We will examine these basic components of Islam. It is our hope that through better understanding of the Muslim faith, you will be better equipped to defend your own Christian beliefs.

Five Basic Tenets of Islam

1. There is only one God, Allah.
2. Muhammad was the last and greatest of the prophets.
3. The Qur'an is the sacred book—the last after the Torah and The Gospels.
4. Life on earth is a preparation for eternal life.
5. The faithful are expected to adore Allah, praise Muhammad, follow the Qur'an and perform good deeds.

Five Pillars of Islam

1. **Shahadah**— Profession of Faith: “There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is His Prophet.”
2. **Salat**— Prayer: The prescribed prayers must be said five times a day facing Mecca. The chief prayer is the Shahadah (above). Special prayers are said on Fridays at noon in the mosque. This is called “The Assembly.” The Call to Prayer (Adhan), heard from minarets or on TV and radio, is always in Arabic.
3. **Zakat**—Almsgiving: Middle and upper class persons are expected to give 2 1/2%, not of what they earn, but of the value of all they possess.
4. **Sawm** – Fasting: During the month of Ramadan (the 9th month of the lunar year) no food or drink may be consumed until sunset.
5. **Hajj** – Pilgrimage: If possible, each of the faithful should try to visit Mecca at least once in his or her life.

Exploring Scripture

Exodus 20:1-17

Matthew 5:3-12

Mark 7:7-8

Exodus 21:1-12:19

Matthew 15:3

Mark 12:29-31

Deuteronomy 6:4

Matthew 22:38-40

I Corinthians 13:2-8

Isaiah 58:3-7

Questions for Discussion

1. Islam has a very clear and simple slate of beliefs. How do they differ from Christianity? Cite a Scriptural reference that shows a real difference between the two faiths.

2. In the video we are told that Muhammad received the Qur'an in a kind of vision. How do you think his "vision" differed from that of the Prophets of the Old Testament? Was it trustworthy? If not, why not?

3. Prayer, almsgiving and fasting are required of Muslims. These things are good practices, but how do they differ from Christian virtues such as prayer for others, including one's enemies?

4. Is the Paradise of pleasure and ease the Muslims seek the same as the Christian Heaven with Christ? If not, how would you explain the difference?

5. Islam unites people of many cultures and nationalities. How should Christians explain their many denominations to Muslims?

6. What did you learn about Muslims that you didn't know before viewing this session?

7. Four possible Christian responses to Muhammad were outlined in this session. They are:

- a. That he was the incarnation of the anti-Christ.
- b. That the Qur'an has much that is consistent with the Bible and Christians should claim common ground where possible, while helping Muslims to accept Jesus.
- c. That Islam has an important role in helping to promote monotheism, but is different from Christianity in that it doesn't recognize Jesus as God's son.
- d. That Muhammad was a genuine prophet from God to the Muslims.

Which of these responses do you feel is the most appropriate? Why?

8. What beliefs are common to both Christians and Muslims? Once you have identified common beliefs, think of ways that these beliefs could be used to help Muslims and Christians relate to each other.

9. Are there aspects of the five pillars of Islam that Christians could learn from?

10. Is it possible to show respect to Muslim beliefs without endorsing those beliefs? Why might this be a crucial step for those wishing to reach Muslims with the gospel?

11. Have you ever visited a mosque? Would you consider doing so in order to learn about Muslim practices? What feelings and fears might such a visit produce in you? Imagine what it might feel like to be “evangelized” by a Muslim. What reactions would that cause you to have?

12. Imagine inviting a Muslim friend as a guest to your church service. What fears might he or she have in that experience? How could you make such a visit a more positive experience?

The Five Social Teachings of Islam

1. Brotherhood – This refers to the brotherhood of all Muslims, but does not include people of other religions. The Qur’an teaches: “Believers, do not make friends with any but your own people” [Sura 3:11], “Muhammad is God’s apostle. Those who follow him are ruthless to unbelievers but merciful to one another” [Sura 48:29].

2. The Muslims are the “favored of Allah,” unbelievers have incurred the wrath of Allah.

3. “An eye for an eye . . . a tooth for a tooth.” This is exemplified by the Shari`ah (Islamic Law.) There is no allowance for repentance and forgiveness.

4. Women must be veiled, preferably clothed in the chador, which covers them entirely. Their place is in the home. A man may have up to four wives at a time if he can provide for them equally. The majority of Muslims have only one wife. Male doctors may not treat women. Women may enter mosques to pray. Muhammad forbade female infanticide. Extra-marital sex is forbidden. Marriage is an honorable estate.

5. Jihad – “Holy War.” Those who die in holy wars are martyrs. The Qur’an states: “Idolatry is more grievous than bloodshed . . . fight against them (idolaters) until idolatry is no more and God’s religion reigns supreme.” [Sura 3:169] Jews, Christians, Hindus and Buddhists are all classified as idolaters. Muhammad set the example for religious war when he conquered Mecca.

Episode Two: The Trinity:

Because they are strict monotheists Muslims reject the doctrine of the Trinity: “There are no gods but Allah.” They cannot accept the idea of Three Persons in One Divine Essence. Therefore, to Muslims, those who believe in the Trinity are blasphemers and must be punished.

Exploring Scripture

Genesis 18:1-3

John 1:1-5

Matthew: 28:19

John 14:26

Mark 13:11

John 19:6

Luke 1-5

II Corinthians 13:14

Luke 12:12

I John 5:7

Questions for Discussion

1. The Trinity is not an easy doctrine to explain. Many great theologians have written on the subject, but concede that it is a mystery. How would you speak to a Muslim about our belief that although we speak of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we still believe in One God? Are you able to adequately explain the concept of the Trinity to seekers of any background? What specific allegories have you found useful in explaining this concept?
2. Which of the above Bible quotes would be most helpful when discussing and even defending the doctrine of the Trinity?
3. In your view, would a seeker be able to come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ without first accepting the doctrine of the Trinity? Why or why not?
4. The Muslim belief is so strong in their one God, what do you think could persuade them to at least examine what Christians believe about the Trinity?

5. From our Christian perspective, it is difficult to imagine a God who is not also “Father.” What fatherly traits or aspects of God have you come to appreciate? What might it be like for Muslims who live with a “god” who doesn’t include these traits?

6. Muslims are not alone in their non-acceptance of the Trinity and the deity of Jesus. Many religions and cults hold this view. Consider this statement: “Christianity is the only religion in which God reaches to man, instead of man reaching to God.” How can this concept be used to your advantage when sharing your faith with all sorts of seekers?

7. Give your interpretation of the angelic visit to Abraham: Genesis 18:1-3.

8. The divinity of Christ is explained by his relationship to the Holy Trinity. Do you think this is too great a stumbling block to all missionary activities with Muslims?

The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem covers a rock which is believed to be a remnant of the Temple of the Jews. It is a holy place to Jews because of the Temple, to Muslims because they believe Muhammad was raised to heavenly ecstasy here, and to Christians because Jesus worshipped in the Temple that once stood on this site and predicted its destruction.



Episode Three: The Bible and the Incarnation

There is reason to believe that the Gospels were not translated into Arabic in Muhammad's time, and, because he was illiterate he had no first-hand knowledge of them.

One of the many differences between the Bible and the Qur'an is that the Bible relates stories of real people and events, whereas the Qur'an is primarily a book of instruction on how to live the Islamic life. Another difference is that the Bible has been translated into hundreds of languages for the use of believers since Muhammad's time, but the Qur'an may be read by Muslims only in Arabic. Although the Qur'an has been translated into other languages these editions are not considered valid and are described as "interpretations."

Muslims accept Jesus as one of the five great Prophets: Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad, who was the last and greatest of the Prophets. Mary receives honorable mention in the Qur'an and Muslims accept the virgin birth, but their strict monotheism forbids them from even considering Jesus as the Son of God.

Exploring Scripture

Psalms 2:7
Isaiah 9:6-7
Mark 1:11
John 3:16-18
John 6:38
John 14:9-11

Romans 1:3-4
Romans 8:3
Romans 8:32
I Corinthians 1:9
II Corinthians 1:19

Galatians 2:20
Galatians 4:4
Hebrews 4:14

Questions for Discussion

On the Bible

1. Muslims seem to hold that Muhammad's illiteracy is proof that the Qur'an is a miraculous word delivered by Gabriel. Discuss the logic behind this view.
2. Which religion (Christianity or Islam) seems to place more value on their scriptures?
3. Christians often use the Bible to substantiate their views. However, it can be very difficult to communicate Biblical truth to those who don't accept the Bible as authoritative. What alternatives can you think of using in a situation where Biblical authority is questioned?
4. How would you explain to a Muslim the relation of Jesus to the Biblical prophecies?
5. Can you indicate the Biblical proofs that Jesus was the Son of God?
6. Unlike the Qur'an, the Bible was written by many different people in 3 different languages over more than 1,000 years. Yet, the Bible's unifying theme of God's grace to his people is evident. Does this thought strengthen or weaken your faith?

On the Incarnation

1. Why do you think that Muslims honor the mother of Jesus and accept the virgin birth, but refuse to accept other Christian beliefs?
2. How would you counter the Muslim insistence that Jesus was only a great prophet?
3. Why is it relatively easy to engage others in conversation about God, but very difficult to engage in discussion about Jesus?
4. If we engage in meaningful discussions with others about God, and in so doing, guide them to take steps toward better understanding of God, are we also leading them towards Jesus?
5. Divide your class into two groups. Ask one group to list the qualities of God on a large sheet of paper. Ask the other group to list qualities describing Jesus on a large sheet of paper. Do not tell the groups what the other group is doing. Reassemble after 5 minutes and examine the lists. How are our views of God and our views of Jesus different? Can this activity help you to better understand God and God in the flesh?

6. Since Christians affirm that God and Jesus are one, are you surprised at the results of the above activity? How can this information help you in presenting the Christian faith to unbelievers?

7. We serve a savior who is actually “God with us.” He is not just a prophet, a teacher, or a miracle worker. The film offers the following five proofs of Jesus’ divinity:

- Jesus’ authority to teach in new ways.
- Jesus’ authority over demons.
- Jesus’ unique relationship as being one with the Father.
- Jesus’ ability to forgive sins as God’s representative.
- Jesus received worship from his disciples as only God can.

Can you think of other items to add to this list?



The church of Hagia Sophia (Holy Wisdom) in Istanbul (formerly Constantinople) was built by Anthemius of Tralles and Isidore of Miletus between 532 and 537. It was dedicated by the Byzantine emperor Justinian in 538. In 1453 the church was converted into a mosque by the Muslim Turks.

Episode Four: The Cross and Salvation

The Qur'an denies the fact of the crucifixion. It teaches that someone else took Jesus's place and died on the cross. Jesus himself was "raptured." Muslims cannot believe that God would permit Jesus to suffer. They also believe that Jesus will come again at the end of the world.

Muslims inherit the ancient Arab traditions of "shame" and "loss of face." However, one may commit a crime and have no shame provided it is not discovered and he does not "lose face. The concepts of sin and repentance of sin do not exist. It has been suggested that this is one of the reasons Islam is spreading so rapidly today. The convert to Islam does not have to repent of his sins, he need only follow the guidelines of the Qur'an in order to obtain Paradise.

Exploring Scripture

Psalms 51:12
Isaiah 53:3-5

Matthew 27:35
Mark 15:24
Luke 23:46
John 3:16-18

Romans 3:23-24
Romans 6:9-10
I Corinthians 2:2
II Thessalonians 4:14

Questions for Discussion

On the Cross

1. We shouldn't be surprised at Muslims' difficulty in accepting that God would allow his son to die on a cross for the salvation of mankind. After all, most Christians have struggled with this very question. Think back to your own acceptance of Jesus' death in your place. What helped you to understand this very difficult concept?

2. The Islamic notion that someone else (a look-alike) endured the crucifixion in Jesus' place is ludicrous to Christians. Discuss the flaws in this view.

3. How would you explain to a Muslim the need for salvation?

4. Hospitality and generosity have always been important in the Arab world. How would you use these ideas to explain God's great love for man?

5. How would you explain the importance of Christ's crucifixion for all mankind? For that matter, how can recognizing your own struggle with difficult truths help you to engage in meaningful conversation with Muslims?

On Salvation

1. Dr. Amina Wadud states in the video: "Christians have the notion of original sin . . . We don't have a sin to be saved from. We are born with a clean slate in Islamic theology. So we don't have to be saved, we have to be successful." Muslims are working for their paradise, while Christians are working because they've already been given the gift of salvation. Why is it so important to understand this distinction?

2. Muslims have the opportunity to earn paradise by following the Qur'an. Some teachings are taken to extremes by radical groups. This includes teachings that call Muslims to eradicate those of other religions in a "holy war." Some estimate that up to 20% of Muslims share these radical views. Their actions can make it nearly impossible for Christians to even desire to reach the Muslim community. How can we begin to get past our own feelings in order to effectively communicate with Muslims?

3. God as revealed in the Bible is so much more than the God known by Muslims. What are some of the qualities of God that Muslims do not recognize?

Conclusion

1. The film concludes with the reading of a moving letter written by a Muslim in the Middle Ages. What longing do you hear in this letter?

2. Dr George presents three ways that Christians can share the good news of God's love with Muslims. Can you list them?

a. _____

b. _____

c. _____

3. Why do you think Dr. George chose this order to present these ideas? What specific plan will you use to put these recommendations into practice?

The minaret is one of the most distinctive pieces of Muslim architecture recognizable throughout the world. It is built either into the fabric of the mosque or to one side. From it a man called the *muezzin* calls out the *adhan* (the call to prayer) five times a day. More often it is an electronic call, rather than that of a live person, and in Islamic countries the *adhan* is also given on the radio and television. The minaret is used only for the *adhan*; it is not a religious symbol like the Cross of Christ on Christian churches.



Timeline of Key Dates

570 – Birth of Muhammad

595 – Muhammad marries Khadija

611 – Beginning of the Qur'an

622 – Hijra to Medina (Muhammad goes to Medina to escape persecution at Mecca)

630 – Mecca conquered

632 – Death of Muhammad

638 – Islam enters Syria, Palestine, Lebanon and Iraq; Jerusalem surrenders

641 – Muslims win Egypt from the Byzantines. By 655 Islam is spreading through North Africa.

711 – Muslims move into Spain and India.

717 – Caliph Uthman II begins first great persecution of Christians

732 – Charles Martel halts the Islamic advance into Europe at Battle of Tours, France

750 – Islamic seat of power now in Baghdad

807 – Caliph Harun al-Rashid orders destruction of new churches.

850 – Christians forced to wear yellow badges under Caliph Mutawakkil (Abbasid Dynasty, Baghdad).

1000 – Islam moves south in Africa to Nigeria

1095 – First Crusade to capture Jerusalem

1099 – Crusaders capture Jerusalem

1120 – Islam spreads to Malaysia

1147 – Second Crusade provoked by fall of Edessa (1144), failed to achieve anything

1187 – Recapture of Jerusalem by Muslims under Saladin



Conquest of Mecca 530AD.

- 1189-1192 – Third Crusade – Coastal territory regained,
but not Jerusalem
- 1202 – Fourth Crusade – Capture of Constantinople**
- 1204 – Conquered Eastern Christians instead of Muslims
- 1204-1291 – Continued attempts to defend European
possessions in Syria. Jerusalem recovered
- 1217-1221 The International Crusade targeted Egypt and failed.
A French Crusade also targeted Egypt and failed.
- 1244 – Christians exiled from Jerusalem**
- 1291-1464 Loss of all Latin states in
the East. (Fall of Acre.)
- 1380-1918 – Ottoman Empire
- 1492 – Muslims driven from
Spain
- 1453 – Ottomans conquered
Constantinople
and changed its name to
Istanbul
- Modern Times*
- 1870 – Muslims immigrate to the
United States
- 1924 – Passage of Asian
Exclusion Act prevents
further immigration of
Muslims to U. S.
- 1928 – Muslim Brotherhood founded
- 1948 – State of Israel created. War between Arabs and Israelis
- 1964 – PLO founded



Crusaders and Saracens

**According to The Population Reference Bureau,
Islam is now the world's fastest-growing religion.**

Suggested Reading

For further reading you will find the article by Dr. Timothy George that appears on the opposite page to be very helpful. In fact, it was this article that prompted us to recommend that Dr. George host a video series on the same subject area. We further recommend Dr. George's more expansive book-length treatment, *Is the Father of Jesus the God of Muhammad?*, published by Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2002.

Other books of interest:

The Crusades

Belloc, Hillaire. *The Crusades: The World's Debate* (Catholic author) Tan Books, Rockford, Ill., 1992.

Maier, Christoph T. *Preaching the Crusades*, Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Runciman, Steve. *The First Crusade* (abridged), Cambridge University Press, 1980. Originally volume one of *The History of the Crusades*, 1951.

Arab History and Culture

Hitti, Philip K. *History of the Arabs*, NY The McMillan Company, 1951.

LeBon, G. *The World of Islamic Civilization*, Tudor Publishing Co. 1974.

Lewis, Bernard, Ed. *Islam and the Arab World*, Alfred A. Knopf, 1976.

Patai, Raphael. *The Arab Mind*, Charles Scribner's Sons, NY, 1973.

Steward, Desmond. *Mecca*, Newsweek, NY, 1980.

For Enthusiasts

Bowerstock, G. W. *Roman Arabia*, Harvard University Press, 1983.

Doughty, Charles M. *Travels in Arabia Deserta*, NY, Boni & Liveright, 1921.

Is the God of Muhammad the Father of Jesus?
The answer to this question reveals the heart of our faith.
**(This article by Dr. Timothy George appeared in *Christianity Today*,
February 4, 2002, Vol. 46, No. 2, Page 28)**

All of us are much more aware of Islam since September 11. If we did not know it before, we know now that more than 1 billion people on Earth, about one of every six people, are Muslims. In the United States alone, according to Muslim leaders, there are more than 6 million Muslims, a little less than half the size of our nation's largest Protestant denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention (at 15 million). Social scientists who count religious adherents, however, place the number of American Muslims much lower, somewhere between 1.8 million and 2.8 million. This more realistic figure falls in the same range as the Assemblies of God or the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod. In any case, the faith is growing exponentially in some parts of the country. Today in my hometown of Birmingham, Alabama, which some call the buckle of the Bible belt, there are several mosques and a thriving Muslim community.

We've also been reminded that Islam, along with Judaism and Christianity, is one of the three monotheistic faiths. Some take that fact and assume that all three faiths are just one great religion, or three equally valid pathways to the same God.

But at this historical moment, when Islam is in our consciousness as never before, we need to look at that claim more closely, especially in regard to Islam. One of the better ways to get at an answer is to focus the question like this: Is the Father of Jesus the God of Muhammad? And what difference does the answer make?

What We Share

These three great religions share a number of important traits not shared, for example, by Eastern religions such as Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism, and Taoism. Even within these agreements, however, we find significant differences.

First, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam are historical religions. Each claims that God has acted decisively in human history. When they say this divine action occurred varies significantly. In Judaism it is the Exodus, God's delivery of his people from slavery in Egypt (“Let my people go”). For Christianity it is the

Incarnation (“the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us”). For Islam it is the beginning of the latest and final revelation, as Muslims see it, with the prophet Muhammad, who was born in 570 in the city of Mecca and died in 632. Furthermore, Islam adopts essential historical figures from both Judaism and Christianity. Moses was a prophet of God, Muslims say, who gave the law of God. Jesus was a friend of God. But when Jesus referred to the Father sending another Counselor, “who will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you” (John 14:26), Muslims believe Jesus was talking not about the Holy Spirit but about Muhammad.

Second, these three religions are textual (we might say scriptural). They have holy books. In Judaism it is the Hebrew Bible, consisting of the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. For Christianity it is the Bible, both the Old and New Testaments. For Islam it's the Qur'an. But the way in which the Qur'an functions in Islam is radically different from the way the Bible functions in Christianity.

The Qur'an was given, so Muslims believe, by the angel Gabriel to the prophet Muhammad over a period of 23 years. It was revealed in Arabic, a direct, divine transcript of a book in heaven. Thus the Qur'an is a divine book. In fact, in some ways, Muslims view the Qur'an as Christians see Jesus Christ: the express image of God, the Word of God. This fact is so important that early Muslims believed, and orthodox Muslim scholars still believe, that the Qur'an cannot be translated. It has been translated, of course, but those translations are not considered authoritative. It must remain in the language of revelation, the language in which it was given, to remain a true revelation for Muslims.

Certain Christian groups throughout history have made a similar claim about the Bible. The Greek Orthodox say that the Septuagint, the Greek version, is the only divinely inspired translation of the Word of God. For many centuries, Roman Catholics held that only the Bible in Latin had that kind of authority. That's no longer true for Roman Catholics. And indeed, some conservative Protestants say only the King James Version has authority. But all three of these are distortions of the Christian understanding of Holy Scripture. Christians believe that the Bible can be translated into any human language. Why? Because the gospel itself is culture-permeable. The Bible, as the revealed Word, has come to us in Greek and Hebrew, the privileged languages of inspiration. But we can translate and transmit it to all people groups, no matter their language, because Christianity says that the gospel we proclaim is world-embracing, as limitless as the gracious love of the Creator.

Finally, these three great religions are all teleological. They have a purpose, a goal. They are headed somewhere. They do not say that life is cyclical, going over and over the same experiences we have known. They do not accept reincarnation. History had a beginning, and God intervened in it in a certain way and guides it toward an appointed climax. Naturally, each has its own understanding of what that future will look like, but all agree that a divine future awaits us.

No Easy Ecumenism

In this post–September 11 world, when we yearn more than ever for the unity of all peoples, we need to think about what we hold in common. We can cooperate with Muslims and Jews in many crucial areas, especially regarding issues that touch on the dignity of human life and the sanctity of the family (British Muslims, for example, were the first religious people to publicly protest abortion on demand in England). But we must not be lulled into an easygoing ecumenism that would amalgamate all faiths into a homogenized whole. The two problems with such amalgamation are these: (1) It is a distortion; we simply do not share the most essential things. (2) It is a sign of disrespect; it fails to take seriously what each religion claims to be ultimate truth.

Among the many distinctive truths Christians proclaim, and one that sets us apart from Islam, is this: God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, is a God who has forever known himself as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This is the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. This is something that all orthodox Christians believe—Greek Orthodox Christians, Roman Catholic Christians, evangelical Protestant Christians, and many others. It is at the heart of the distinctive message we proclaim and what sets us apart most dramatically from Islam.

Sadly, the doctrine of the Trinity may be the most neglected doctrine we hold. We are baptized in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. We often hear that wonderful Pauline benediction at the end of 2 Corinthians, “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” The Trinity is essential to our statements of faith, our creeds, and our confessions. Yet we neglect it.

Why? Partly because we cannot understand it or explain it. Partly because we forget why it's important. It's one of those things we have to check off on our list of beliefs, but it doesn't deeply inform our faith. It's not something that we wake up every day and go to our knees with in prayer. And so we tend to shove it to the side—until we find ourselves in a discussion with a Muslim who says to us, “Oh, you Christians claim to believe in one God, but really you believe in three gods.”

In fact, the Qur'an itself declares in Surah 5:73 (see also 4:171) that Christians believe in three gods, and that this is blasphemy against Allah. Islam arose in the Christian era, when theologians and laity still hotly debated the great Trinitarian formulas. Some Christians were teaching heretical notions of the Trinity in Mecca, where Muhammad lived. One such heresy claimed something like this: God has a wife named Mary, with whom he had intercourse, resulting in Jesus.

This is the distortion of the doctrine of the Trinity that Muhammad heard. He assumed, as do many others who call Christians “tri-theists,” that this is what we believe and teach. He may have rejected a distortion, but Muslims reject the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity as well. And with that, they forsake Christians' conceptual framework for understanding the story of Jesus as the story of God. What does the Bible teach about this matter that we say is such a dividing point with Islam?

One God

We begin with the confession that God is One. This goes back to Deuteronomy 6:4, the famous Shema: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” It is repeated throughout the Old Testament. Jesus quotes it in the New Testament as the first and greatest of all the commandments in Mark 12:29: “You shall love the Lord your God; the Lord is One. Love the Lord with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” Jesus believed that. He taught that. It is foundational to the Christian faith.

How did this belief arise within the faith of Israel? It arose over against polytheism, which was rampant in the ancient world. It was a world in which nature—animals, trees, rivers—was regarded as divine or at least inhabited by divinities. Out of this arose the tradition of idolatry, against which the Old Testament prophets blasted again and again with furious power. (Muhammad too was moved by a similar concern when he destroyed the idols of Mecca, and taught his followers, “There is no God but Allah.”)

At the same time, there are already hints in the Old Testament that God is more complex. Just as we have foreshadowing of the Messiah, so too in the Old Testament we have foreshadowing of the Holy Trinity.

It is there at the Creation. In the beginning, God created by speaking his word. Genesis 1:2 also notes that the ruach, the Spirit of God, hovered over the face of the waters. When Christians read that passage in the light of Jesus Christ, they see there a hint of the Trinity. It is not spelled out in clarity and fullness. It took time in God's unfolding of revelation to achieve that clarity. Not until

Jesus Christ himself came, in fact, were we able to understand it. But it is foreshadowed there nonetheless.

Or take another example, from Proverbs. Again and again, it speaks about God's wisdom. It says that wisdom created all things (Prov. 3:19), treating wisdom as a personification of God himself. In the New Testament, we find that Wisdom is one of the proper names of Jesus Christ. Jesus has been “made unto us wisdom” (1 Cor. 1:30, KJV).

Then there are all those amazing theophanies and Christophanies. Jacob wrestled all night with an angel, and he said the next day as he limped along the river Jabbok, “I have seen the face of God” (Gen. 32:30, KJV). It was not an incarnation but a revelation of the true God. Or consider Nebuchadnezzar looking into the fiery furnace. He sees a fourth man along with the three Hebrew children walking loose in the flames, one who “looks like a son of the gods” (Dan. 3:25, NIV; the KJV is more directly Christological, translating it as “as though he were the Son of God”). These are foreshadowings in the Old Testament, but none of them compromise the fundamental unity of God.

Christians, like Muslims, affirm the oneness of God, but they understand that oneness not in mathematical terms (as a unit) but in interpersonal terms (as a unity of relationship).

Allah Became Flesh?

This distinction leads us to the most basic and distinctive Christian belief: Jesus is Lord. The Old Testament confession is “God is one.” The New Testament affirmation is “Jesus is Lord,” declaring the deity of Jesus Christ. It's not a coincidence that two key books of the Bible start by using the same phrase:

Genesis 1:1: “In the beginning God created. ... “ God spoke, and worlds that were not came into being.

John 1:1: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.” This beginning antedates the Incarnation. It goes beyond and before even the Creation. It is a beginning before all other beginnings. The Greek is simple: *en arche*, in the primordial first principle of all things and all times, in the beginning that we can speak of as eternity—in this beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and (literally) “God was the Word.” In Greek that expression is *pros ton theon* (face to face with God).

In John 1:18, which closes John's prologue, we read, "No one has ever seen God, but God, the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known" (NIV). That translation is just too weak. Here the KJV gets closest to the original sense when it says Jesus was "in the bosom of the Father."

"At the Father's side"? You can go to a ball game, and somebody sits alongside you. That's a chum, that's a friend. This is not the phrase used here. The one "who is in the bosom of the Father"—that connotes an intimacy, a relationship, a unity that "alongside of" comes nowhere close to. This God, the One who was with God, face to face with God, in the bosom of the Father from all eternity—this One has made him known to us.

In verse 14 is the linchpin of this whole passage. This one verse, more than any other, summarizes the Christian faith. The Word that was in the beginning with God, that was face to face with God, that was in the bosom of the Father, this "Word was made flesh and dwelt among us (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father), full of grace and full of truth" (KJV).

This is what Christianity teaches: God Almighty, the one and only Allah (Allah is simply the Arabic word for "God"), took upon himself humanity. But not just humanity. Some translations read, "And the Word became a human being." That's too weak. It's not deep or strong enough. No, the Word became flesh.

Flesh is different from human being. Flesh is that part of our human reality that is most vulnerable, that gets sick. It gets tired. It experiences decay and death. But this is the stupendous claim the Bible makes, and if you don't feel the absolute horrible force of this statement, you'll never understand why orthodox Islam finds Christianity so abhorrent: Allah became flesh. This is a blasphemous thought to orthodox Muslims. But it's a remarkable claim that Christianity makes.

How does this relate to the Trinity? People ask why God made the world. Some believe he was lonely and decided that he needed something to love, so he created the world. Some people preach that, and it's well meant, but it is heretical.

God was never lonely. The doctrine of the Trinity says that within the being of God from all eternity there has always existed this bond of relationship—Father and Son and Holy Spirit, the bond of love and unity—so God never was lonely. There has always been in the being of God a reciprocity, a mutuality, and a dynamism of relationship, of community, of love.

Several radical implications proceed from this. One of them—a rather humbling one—is that we are not necessary. We are utterly unessential. God could get along quite well without us. It doesn't boost our self-esteem to say that, but it's true. If God had never created the world, or indeed, if God had never redeemed the world, God would not be any less God. He does not need us to fulfill some inner inadequacy in his own being.

Paradoxically, this truth makes the Good News good. God has chosen to love us, out of his own free will. He decided deliberately not to remain a divine cocoon within himself. Instead, he chose to make a world apart from himself, to become a part of it and take upon himself the burden of loving it back to himself—because he wanted to, not because he lacked something in himself.

This is the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the Good News that we have to proclaim: the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is not a unit. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is not a monad, a sterile one-thing that exists apart from a relationship, but has a dynamic relationship of love and reciprocity within his own being—and that as a relational being he has reached out to us in love.

Many are familiar with George Eliot's character, Silas Marner. Everybody thought he was poor, but he was rich. He was a miser. He kept gold coins in a chest under his bed. And every night, before he went to sleep, he'd take out his gold coins, count them, stroke them, and admire them. Then he'd put them back under his bed. He never spent one. Some people think of God that way: He hoards all his power, all his might. He's a miser god—a Silas Marner god. This is not the God of the Bible. The God of the Bible is a God of utter graciousness

and love, who chooses to come into our world and to experience what we have experienced—our alienation and estrangement—and do everything necessary to redeem and love that world back to himself.

Personal Spirit

Some people think that in the Old Testament we have God the Father, in the New Testament God puts on the mask of the Son, and now, in the age of the church, we have the Holy Spirit. The technical name for that heresy is modalism, and it's widespread among Christian believers. No, the Trinity is not three different masks that God wears at different times in salvation history. From all eternity, before there was a world, before there was anything else, God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, was—is—in a bond of love and unity and reciprocity and community that exceeds our ability to comprehend and describe.

These first two Christian affirmations—God is one, and Jesus is Lord—have been denied and doubted and fought over by Christian theologians. In the second century, a heretic named Marcion was excommunicated from the church. Marcion said, in effect, I like the God of Jesus. He's a God of love; he's a God of mercy, a God of tenderness. But I don't like the God of the Old Testament. He's a mean God. He's a mad God. He's a God of war and violence. So Marcion cut the Old Testament out of the Bible. But the church said, No, we're not going down that road. It was perhaps the single most important decision made in the history of Christian doctrine—to say that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the God of Israel, the God of the Old Testament, to affirm that there is a fundamental connection between creation and redemption.

The divine lordship and the deity of Jesus Christ were denied in the fourth century by a man named Arius. He was sincere. He was well read. He did not deny that the Bible was true. But he said, Jesus Christ is a creature. He's higher than any other creature. But he is not God. Arius denied that Jesus was the same essence, the same fundamental reality, as God. At the Council of Nicea, the church had to say, No, we can't go that way either. The one we adore and worship and love in Jesus our Redeemer is of the same essence as the Father. We're not talking about two different gods. We're talking about the one God, but the one God who has forever known himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This says to us that the fundamental reality of God is relationship—it's community. If we can ever grasp that, we'll understand what our fundamental differences are with Islam.

The third central Christian affirmation is that the Holy Spirit is personal. This affirmation also has had a divisive history. About 70 years after the Council of Nicea, some people said they would go along with God the Father and God the Son, but they could not affirm that the Holy Spirit is God—that was just too much for them. They claimed that the Holy Spirit is a force, an energy, a power, but not God. Over against these people, who were known as the Spirit-fighters (because they fought against the deity of the Holy Spirit), the church declared that God is one in essence, and three in person—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The Bible speaks of the Holy Spirit as a person. He baptizes (1 Cor. 12); he can be grieved (Eph. 4); he groans (Rom. 8). These are things a person does, and the Holy Spirit is a person and in relation to the Father and Son—yet one God, forever and ever.

Space constraints preclude saying much more about the place of the Holy Spirit in the Trinity. The larger point here is simply this: God does not exist alone—“the alone with the alone” as Arius referred to his god—but rather exists in community, in love, in reciprocity and mutuality. It is this God who has, of his own free will, opened his heart to this world he has made, and who invites us to know him, to love him, and to respond to him. He is a relational God.

Affirming The Mystery

Ultimately, we have to admit that the Trinity is a mystery. Even in eternity, we will never comprehend it. But we are called to affirm it and believe it. And we are called to hold it without compromise in a world of religious pluralism.

Let's go back to our question: Is the Father of Jesus the God of Muhammad? The answer is surely Yes and No. Yes, in the sense that the Father of Jesus is the only God there is. He is the Creator and Sovereign Lord of Muhammad, Buddha, Confucius, of every person who has ever lived. He is the one before whom all shall one day bow (Phil. 2:5–11). Christians and Muslims can together affirm many important truths about this great God—his oneness, eternity, power, majesty. As the Qur'an puts it, he is “the Living, the Everlasting, the All-High, the All-Glorious” (2:256).

But the answer is also No, for Muslim theology rejects the divinity of Christ and the personhood of the Holy Spirit—both essential components of the Christian understanding of God. No devout Muslim can call the God of

Muhammad “Father,” for this, to their mind, would compromise divine transcendence. But no faithful Christian can refuse to confess, with joy and confidence, “I believe in God the Father. ... Almighty!” Apart from the Incarnation and the Trinity, it is possible to know that God is, but not who God is.

Long ago, Gregory of Nyssa put it this way: “It is not the vastness of the heavens and the bright shining of the constellations, the order of the universe, and the unbroken administration over all existence, that so manifestly displays the transcendent power of God as his condescension to the weakness of our human nature, in the way sublimity is seen in lowliness.”

This does not mean that we should condemn every Muslim believer as an idolater (see “Does God Hear Muslims' Prayers?”). And we are wise to remember that sometimes the best way to address these issues is to move from theological abstraction to story. I've found one story from Richard Selzer's *Mortal Lessons*, as good as any:

I stand by the bed where a young woman lies, her face post-operative, her mouth twisted in palsy, clownish. A tiny twig of the facial nerve, the one to the muscles of the mouth, has been severed. She will be thus from now on. The surgeon had followed with religious fervor the curve of her flesh; I promise you that. Nevertheless, to remove the tumor in her cheek, I had to cut that little nerve.

Her young husband is in the room. He stands on the opposite side of the bed, and together they seem to dwell in the evening lamplight, isolated from me. Who are they, I ask myself, he and this wry-mouth that I have made, who gaze at and touch each other so generously, greedily? The young woman speaks.

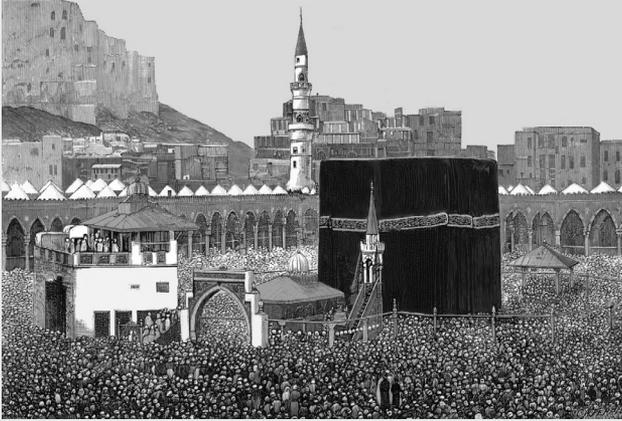
“Will my mouth always be like this?” she asks. “Yes,” I say, “it will. It is because the nerve was cut.”

She nods, and is silent. But the young man smiles. “I like it,” he says. “It is kind of cute.”

All at once, I know who he is. I understand, and I lower my gaze. One is not bold in an encounter with a god. Unmindful, he bends to kiss her crooked mouth, and I [am] so close I can see how he twists his own lips to accommodate to hers, to show her that their kiss still works.

Isn't that what the Christian God is about? God was in Christ, reaching out to us in love, accommodating himself to our condition, to save us.

This is what we are about as ambassadors of Christ and his gospel: to go into the world, into the prisons, into the barrios and the ghettos and wherever it is that human beings exist in alienation and separation from God, and to tell them that the relational God is reaching out to us, and that the kiss still works.

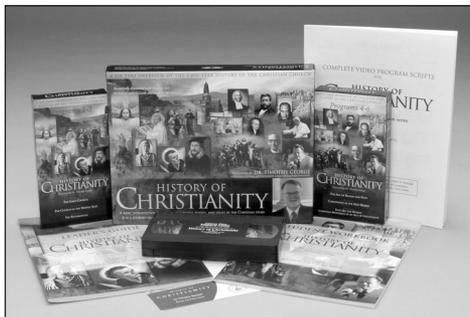


The Kaaba at Mecca (Arabia) was once a pagan temple. Muhammad removed the statues but kept the building. Tradition says it is the oldest house in the world, having belonged to Abraham. Actually it has been rebuilt five times. Pilgrims venerate the building, which is completely covered with a black cloth, and kiss a small black stone inserted in the southeast corner. No one knows where the stone came from or why it is venerated, but it has the appearance of a piece of meteorite. (From an 1895 print.)

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