

# Common Ground between Islam and Christianity

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For many, Islam and Christianity have little in common. More than a few Christians misperceive Islam as a religion of the sword and of oppression, while many Muslims see Christianity as permissive and rampant with sin. Yet, much of this misperception arises from the different emphases and vocabulary peculiar to each religion. In fact, most of their practices and beliefs are quite similar, as they should be, since they came from prophets of Allah (God). By reading key concepts in the Bible, the Qur'an, and hadiths (traditions of the Prophet), we can see their common points.

## Faith and Works

To receive the favor of Allah, faith and works are crucial. The Prophet Muhammad stated that faith is required to enter Paradise (Muslim 1:96), and the Apostle Paul wrote that, "the righteous will live by faith" (Romans 1:17). In both religions faith goes hand in hand with good deeds and requires them to perfect it (Qur'an 2:177; James 2:22). Indeed, Jesus says that only those who do God's will can enter heaven (Matthew 7:21).

## Love

Just as faith without works is dead (James 2:17), so, too, is it dead without love.

### *Love of one's neighbor*

Muhammad affirmed: "You will not believe as long as you do not love one another" (Muslim 1: 96) and "No man is a true believer unless he wants for his brother that which he wants for himself" (Bukhari 1:12). Concurring, Jesus said that to love your neighbor as yourself was like loving God (Matthew 23:37-39).

Although the word "love" appears less frequently in the Qur'an than in the Bible, the notion of love permeates it. True love consists of right action towards one's neighbor, of taking care of others, of and helping those in need. In verse after verse, the Qur'an enjoins believers to be charitable to orphans, widows, travelers, and the poor. According to one hadith: "The best Islam is that you feed the hungry and spread peace among people you know and those you do not know." Similarly, Jesus tied Peter's loving him to taking care of his disciples (John 21:15-17), and John asserts that those who do not help a brother in need when they are able to do so do not have the love of God in them (1 John 3:17).

### *Love of God*

Love of neighbors is a cornerstone of both Islam and Christianity, but love of God is the foundation. Such love is expressed in many ways, but let's look at four: prayer, repentance, contentment, and surrender to God.

People desire to be with and talk with those they love. Thus, Christians and Muslims who love God "pray continually" (1 Thessalonians 5:17) and "remember Allah much" (Qur'an 33:21). Prayer is a cleansing activity, partially because engaging in it allows people to see God's greatness and their own unworthiness. Such understanding brings repentance, which is essential to receiving God's approval and forgiveness (Qur'an 20:82; Muslim 2:1142; Matthew 4:17; Mark 1:15; Luke 5:32; 15:7).

Through cycles of prayer, repentance, and forgiveness, the believers' love of God grows. This gradually results in a weakening of the desires for worldly things, the cause of discontent. Becoming content with what God has allotted them, they "give thanks in all circumstances" (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18), whether good or bad. Such believers are loved by people and by God, as one hadith says: "Desire not the world, and God will love you; and desire not what men have, and they will love you."

To be fully content means love surrendered to Allah, a key concept in Islam. Indeed, the word "Islam" is understood to mean surrender, as it says in the Qur'an (3:19): "The religion before Allah is Islam," Christianity believes the same, for as Jesus said, the greatest commandment is to "Love the Lord our God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matthew 22:37). In other words, give your entire being to God.

Those who completely devote themselves to God are, naturally, the closest to Him. Yet God near all believers. Christians believe that God, in the form of the Holy Spirit, lives within them (1 Corinthians 6:19). For Islam, the indwelling concept is not prevalent, but God is nearer to the believer than his jugular veins (Qur'an 50:16) and says: "When my servants ask you about me, tell them I am near, I hear the prayer of the one who calls upon Me" (Qur'an 2:186).

## **Paradise**

Both Christianity and Islam teach that those who love God, believe in God, and do good deeds will receive rewards (Matthew 5:5-11, 6:1-6, 10:41-42, 16:27, 1 Corinthians 3:14, 9:17, Ephesians 6:8, Qur'an 2:62, 3:144, 145, 148). The best reward, of course, is eternal life in Paradise.

Who gets this reward? In both religions, the answer is quite controversial. There are those who say that only adherents to their own religion - whether Christianity or Islam - go to Heaven. Many Christians confidently assert that only those who believe in Jesus will have eternal life (John 3:18, 11:25-26), and many Muslims affirm just as strongly that only those who believe in Allah and accept Muhammad as His Messenger will enter Paradise.

In both religions, however, others disagree. Some Christians claim that it is necessary only that one has to believe in God and try to do good (Matthew 7:21, 10:42, 25:31-46). Likewise, some Muslims who agree with this view cite the Qur'an (2:62): "Believers, Jews, Sabaeans, or Christians - whoever believes in God and the Last Day and does what is right - shall have nothing to fear or to regret."

Adherents to both religions concur, though, that eternal life is a gift of God and based completely upon His mercy (Romans 9:15-16, Qur'an 3:74, 10:99-100; Bukhari 7:577). Nevertheless, God does not reject anyone who comes to Him: "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you" (James 4:8), and "He who loves to meet Allah, Allah also loves to meet him..." (Muslim 2:1120).

## **Misunderstanding**

As the Bible and the Qur'an agree on many things, why then do Muslims and Christians perceive each other so differently and so often misunderstand each other? Such a question, of course, deserves an in-depth, multi-faceted answer; however, we will look at just one of those facets: a difference of emphasis and vocabulary.

Muslims tend to emphasize right action, while Christians tend to focus on right belief. Consequently, when Christians hear Muslims say that they are earning merit through their good deeds, they jump to the conclusion that Islam is a religion of works, not faith, and that Muslims are trying to earn their salvation, which no one can do. Also, Christians, disturbed by Muslims' emphasis on imitating the prophet Muhammad, perceive Muslims as legalistic and fixed on externals rather than on such transforming internals like as love. They do not realize that for Muslims, good deeds earn merit only if one has faith, and that it is love of the Prophet that leads them to follow his example.

In turn, when Muslims hear Christians talking about freedom and love, they believe that Christians can sin as much as they want and still enter Paradise, a perception bolstered by the immortality of not only ordinary people but also of the highly visible religious and political leaders

in the West. Muslims fail to understand that the love of God prevents pious Christians from sinning. And there are other similar vocabulary problems resulting in misunderstanding and misperception that are exacerbated by the natural belief that theirs is the true and final religion. This misguided attitude causes both Muslims and Christians to exaggerate any potential difference to its worst extreme, and to forget that their own religions have the same concepts, albeit sometimes de-emphasized or expressed differently.

## **Main Differences**

Not all differences are a matter of misperception; a few are even fundamental. The most important one concerns the nature of God. Both Christianity and Islam agree that God is the Creator of the universe, the source of truth, omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, eternal, full of compassion and mercy, but also the One who dispenses justice. Despite this agreement, however, Christians believe in a Trinity, three persons in one God head: the Father, the Son (Jesus), and the Holy Spirit. In contrast, Muslims (and Jews) assert that Jesus is not God, but and that God is one without any has no partners (Qur'an 37:4; Deuteronomy 6:4).

A second major difference, is the concept of atonement. Christians believe, that Jesus died as a sacrifice for everyone's sins (Hebrews 9:26; 1 Peter 1:2, 19; 1 John 2:2), which becomes effective for the individual upon his or her confession of belief to those, who believe in Jesus (John 3:15-18; Romans 1:16). In Islam, though, sacrifices do not atone for sin but represent one's devotion to Allah. Consequently, no sacrificial intercessor is necessary or possible (Qur'an 2:256). Instead, God forgive those who sincerely repent and make right correct their previous wrongs.

## **Conclusion**

Although the disagreement on the tenure of God and on the atonement of Jesus seems unresolvable, most differences are more a matter of emphasis rather than of disagreement.

Christianity stresses right belief and faith, but no Christian would deny that they should do good deeds and have good behavior. On the contrary, they "work" hard to please God because of their faith. Muslims, on the other hand, assuming that faith is necessary, prefer to emphasize the practical side of perfecting their faith via good works. Christians and Muslims agree that faith is necessary and that good works are important.

In reality, if one were simply to watch the outward behavior of pious Muslims and Christians in their lives, it would be quite difficult to know who was a Muslim and who was a Christian – for the pious of both religions who love their God and who have surrendered their lives to Him pray much, help needy, and are kind towards their neighbors and their families. Due to its shortness this article will necessarily make broad generalizations that have many exceptions.

All hadiths not given a source come from the book *The Sayings of Muhammad* by Allama Sir Abdullah Alal-Ma'mun Alal-Suhrawardy, who affirmed their authenticity (p.18).