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Promoting Understanding of Islam from a Christian Perspective

Among the most commonly misunderstood religions in the world is Islam. As a faith, it is portrayed as violent and destructive, despite being a religion of peace. In addition, many Christians view it as radically different from their faith, despite being arguably the closest religion to Christianity. These views are often quickly and easily dismissed and refuted. In and of themselves, these claims are not intolerant, but perpetuation of the claims can easily lead to religious intolerance.

I personally encountered such misconceptions in April of 2016. While volunteering for the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, one of the volunteers mentioned a home visit in which the home owner was Muslim. The owner had grown up Christian, but had been studying Islam. He told the volunteers that Christianity and Islam are not quite so different and in fact share a common God, whether He be called God, YHWH, or Allah. The volunteers met this claim with disbelief, although it was not truly expressed until after the fact.

While the misconception of radical difference between Abrahamic faiths seems to be a simple fix to those educated on the issue, however it requires a massive shift in understanding of Islam to those who are ignorant of the concept. What I thought would be a quick, minute-long explanation winded up turning into a longer discussion that included questions about Islam that I couldn’t answer.

The most critical part of formulating discussion on the issue is approaching the conversation with care. While the facts may be in favor of evidence that the two religions are similar, people tend to balk at aggressive approaches and arguments. This is difficult, since there is widespread media portrayal of Islam as aggressive and violent. For example, Christianity.com states that “when Muslim terrorists take up the call to arms in the name of Allah, they are*fulfilling* the Qur’an, not opposing it” (Ponder). These articles are ubiquitous among media sites and perpetuated through social media.

When someone refers to an article that “proves” Islam is a religion of destruction, it is generally a good idea to point out that context is important when reading scripture, whether it be the Bible or the Qur’an. For example, Ponder uses the “negative” quote: “Kill them [unbelievers] wherever you find them… And fight them until there is no more unbelief and worship is for Allah alone” (*Qur’an* 2:191-193). Interestingly, this phrase comes from a larger passage, in which the “them” doesn’t refer to unbelievers, but to those who deliberately oppress a group of people, since Allah sees all peoples as equal.

Quotes can be misused from the Bible just as easily. In Deuteronomy it states, “**10**When you march up to attack a city, make its people an offer of peace…**12**If they refuse to make peace and they engage you in battle, lay siege to that city… **14**As for the women, the children, the livestock and everything else in the city, you may take these as plunder for yourselves” (*New International Version*, Deut. 20:10, 12, 14). Many Christians would agree that Christianity is a religion of peace, yet the Bible tells them to pillage villages and keep everything within as plunder. This is once again an example of a quote taken out to context. In this case, the Israelites are being instructed to wipe out several tribes that worshipped “contagious” idols. When they did not do this, they ended up worshipping these idols.

Likewise, non-Muslims generally fail to understand the concept of Jihad. Jihad is “struggle against one’s own inner self” (Akhter). It isn’t some sort of mystery power that forces Muslims to suicide bomb planes into important skyscrapers. In fact, in general over the course of history, when Jihad was used to create war, it was a perversion of Jihad used for political gain. According to Akhter, “the history of the Muslim rulers, on the other hand, gives us examples of those who attempted to sanctify their wars of personal aggrandizement as wars for a noble cause by applying the label Jihad to them.”

Such misuses can be found in Christianity as well, dating all the way back to the early second millennium during the Crusades. The Crusades used Christianity as an excuse to fight and gain riches for European countries and the Vatican. In addition, in the early history of The United States of America, the Bible was used as a false pretext for slavery in the South. Southern pastors would (and sometimes still do) misuse quotes from the Bible in order to justify the enslavement of Africans and Native Americans.

On a more fundamental level, both Christianity and Islam have similar core principles as Abrahamic faiths. Being an Abrahamic faith requires a base reliance on the Torah. This is manifested in the first five books of the Old Testament in Christianity and the Tawrat in Islam. In both religions, these sets of scripture outline the basic laws of each faith and are functionally identical to each other. The only true difference between the two is that the Torah in Christianity was translated from Hebrew to Latin and the Tawrat in Islam was translated from Hebrew to Arabic. As an extension, both religions have a functionally identical Old Testament (Tanakh in the Islam belief).

It may come as a surprise to many Christians that Muslims believe in Jesus. Unlike Christians, yet like Jews, they believe that Jesus was a prophet and not the Messiah. However, Muslims take it a step farther than Jews by believing in the Immaculate Conception (*Qur’an* 19:16-21). They also believe that Jesus was granted the power to perform miracles (*Qur’an* 2:87), including the power of resurrection of the dead (*Qur’an* 3:49). This is a drastic difference between the common view of Islamic belief in Jesus and the actual belief by Muslims.

Key differences can be identified, however. Christians believe in Jesus Christ as Our Savior and Messiah, while Muslims view Jesus as a prophet that Allah granted special abilities. In addition, Christians believe that Jesus died and was resurrected, while Muslims do not believe he was crucified or martyred. Finally, Muslims view Mohammed as the final prophet from God, while many Christians, with the exception of Latter Day Saints and other minority sects, do not believe in prophets after Jesus. These differences are near negligible, however, as Christianity and Islam agree on critical issues, such as doctrinal tolerance and both religions worship the same God, albeit by different names.

In order to create a discussion and have dialogue, all of these issues must be addressed and both sides must be willing to morph their views in an academic setting. By doing so, a culture of tolerance can be fostered, and crucial misunderstandings can be cleared up. It is important to recognize that the majority of people do not act out of malevolence, but rather due to simple ignorance. Ignorance is temporary, while malevolence is permanent, so rational discussion can benefit all of us.