

QUESTION

WHAT ARE THE MAJOR POINTS OF SIMILARITY AND DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE BELIEFS AND PRACTICES OF MUSLIMS AND CHRISTIANS?

INTRODUCTION

The early history of Islam revolves around one central figure, Muhammad-born around 570 AD in the city of Mecca in Arabia. The word '*Islam*' is a noun, which is, formed from the Arabic verb meaning "*to submit, surrender or commit oneself*". Islam means submission or surrender, and with the translation comes the idea of action, not simple stagnation. The very act of submissive commitment is at the heart of Islam, not simply a passive acceptance and surrender to doctrine. *Muslim*, another noun form of the same verb means "*the one who submits*". The two great branches of Muslim learning, theology and jurisprudence govern the belief and practice of Islam. Muslim theology or belief (*Tawhid*) defines all that a man should believe, while the law or practice (*Shari'a*) prescribes everything that he should do.

In this account, I would try to explain what seems to me to be the major points of similarities and differences between the beliefs and practices of Muslim and Christians. The order of arrangement would be in two major parts. Similarities of beliefs followed by its differences on one hand, and similarities of practices followed by its differences on the other, and then the conclusion.

SIMILARITIES IN BELIEF

In doctrine (*Islamic articles of faith*) however, there is so much superficial similarity-in the understanding of the reality, the oneness and the sovereignty of God, of heaven, hell and angels, of the prophets and scriptures, of mercy and of the responsibility of man, of eternal life and destiny, of submission and obedience to God, of Jesus and his expected second coming-Muslims frequently tell Christians, “*We all believe the same thing; it’s just that you call Jesus the Son of God, while we call him a Prophet*”.

DIFFERENCES IN BELIEF

But beneath these similar labels there is radical disparity of content. The distinctive Christian faith-*the incarnation and atonement*-are most emphatically denied by the Muslims. They claim that Jesus did not die, but was taken up alive into heaven, while a substitute (*usually believed to be Judas was mistakenly crucified*). Islam was founded by a dead prophet; Christianity was founded by the risen Saviour.

From the Muslim point of view, Islam is coeval with the human race. Adam was the first Muslim, indeed the first prophet of Islam. Noah in turn was a great prophet, followed in due course by Abraham the friend of God, and his honoured elder son and fellow prophet Ishmael, progenitor of the Arabs, from whom Muhammad was born.

On the other hand, some historians of Religion have classified Islam as a heretical offshoot of

Christianity, but although it does have some features that reflect Christian source, it is clearly a distinct religion and is very generally so regarded. Mohammed drew freely from the teachings of the Bible, and from Jewish and Christian ideas as well as Arabic sources and Gnostic concepts. He recognised the prophets tradition as found in the Bible and counted Jesus among the Prophets. For his followers, Muhammad is the final prophet.

Other key doctrines of the Christian faith that the Muslims reject are the Trinity and the sin of man and his salvation by grace alone through faith in Christ. They also reject the Bible as the only authoritative book on which to base all matters of doctrine. And while God was the exclusive source of the revelation to Mohammed, God Himself is not the content of the revelation. Revelation in Islamic theology does not mean God disclosing himself. It is revelation from God, not revelation of God. According to the Muslim faith, God is remote, and He is inaccessible to human knowledge.... Even though we are His creatures whose every breath is dependent upon Him, it is not on inter-personal relationship with Him that we receive guidance from Him.

From the non-Muslim and Christian point of view, Islam is seen as commencing with Muhammad, and firmly centred in his great master work, the Koran-regarded by Muslims as of eternal, quasi-divine status. *(Here a basic difference from Christianity may be observed: the focus of the gospel is on its divine Founder, the New Testament having the secondary status of witness to him. With Islam it is the book which is divine, the Prophet being only the human instrument).* When Islam rejects the truth of the written Word of God, they are left not only different from Christianity, but opposite from Christianity on all counts.

SIMILARITIES IN PRACTICE

Besides, there are “*five pillars of faith*”. These are observances in Islam, which are foundational

practices or duties every Muslim must observe. The main pillar is the Creed, *the Ash-Shahadah*, the words of which mean. *'There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah'*. These words are pronounced when a person adopts Islam. There is such in Christianity as well, but the contents and the use of it are quite different.

Another pillar is called '*Zakat*' literally means '*purification of wealth*'. It is not a tax and it has an equivalent in Christianity. According to the Bible teaching (*Malachi 3:8-11*) Christians are expected to bring '*Tithe*' (*one tenth of their earning*) to the house of God. But in the case of Zakat, it is an obligation on Muslim men and women who possess enough wealth to give a portion of it away. There is Zakat on every kind of wealth, on money, land, goods, houses and cattle. The amount on money, gold and silver is two and a half percent each year which is to be given to any of the eight categories mentioned by God in the Quran: the poor, the needy, Zakat collectors, converts, prisoners, debtors, wayfarers, and '*In the way of God*'.

Muslims practice ritual prayer five times a day, recited while looking in the direction of Mecca. Five times a day the Muslim is supposed to say his prayers, with the necessary ritual-the prostration, washing of some parts of the body and so forth. Nevertheless, both words and forms are rigidly fixed, and to Christians accustomed to more flexible and variable forms of prayer, it may seem that this monotonous iteration represents a certain ossification of the spirit of religion. In fact, it cannot be doubted that this prayer, by the very fact that it is endlessly repeated from day to day, impresses on the Muslim soul a certain pattern, a certain temper. Christian' prayers as I know it does not involve such series of ritual activities, it is a living relationship with God as revealed in Christ Jesus.

Faithful Muslims fast from sun-up to sundown each day during the holy month of '*Ramadan*'. The fast develops self-control and devotion to God. No food or drink may be consumed during the daylight hours; no smoking or sexual pleasures may be enjoyed, either. Many Muslims eat two meals a day during Ramadan, one before sunrise and one shortly after sunset. Fasting has other effects on Muslims such as establishing equality among the rich and poor as well as the promotion of sympathy towards the needy. It gives the strength to break bad habits and increases the will power in general. Also in Christianity, there is what is known as '*Time of Lent*' when Christians are expected to go on fasting; they eat only once a day and that is at sunset. The purposes are not quite different and so are the effects.

Pilgrimage to Mecca (*Hajj*) is the journey taken by Muslims to the Sacred House (*Al-Masjid Al-Haram*) in Mecca to perform the religious duties of Hajj. Mecca has become the centre of the world for over 900 million Muslims. Every Muslim hopes to go to Mecca for Hajj once in his life, in response to the command of God. Every year over three million people from all over the world lands at Jeddah by air, sea and land. It can be extremely arduous on the old or infirm, so in their cases they may send someone in their places. The trip is an essential part in Muslims' gaining salvation. It involves a set of ceremonies and rituals, many of which centre around the *Ka'aba shrine*, to which the pilgrimage is directed.

Many Christians makes pilgrimage to Jerusalem, Rome and other places of historical importance to Christian' religion, but not on the same ground as the Muslims. However, one situation that seems similar is what I learnt recently about the coming year of Jubilee (2000 A.D). We were told that

about sixty million Catholic pilgrims from all over the world would be visiting the Vatican City in Rome all through the year. It is believed that there is a particular door in the city-temple, opens only on Jubilee and through which whoever passes shall be free of all sins automatically.

One area of similarity between the Muslims and the Christians beliefs and practices can be located in the existence of different denominations (*Orthodox, Liberal or Modernist and Fundamentalist*). Just as we have the *Charismatic Movement* in Christianity whose characteristics of baptism in the Spirit, speaking in tongues, direct revelations from God, and divine intervention in response to prayer for well-being (*conversion, physical and emotional healing, exorcism, and deliverance from evil*) have formed a very distinctive culture from the Evangelical, Catholic or Orthodox, the '*Sufis*' are also the mystics of Islam. They are quite small, but have an influence out of all proportion to its numbers. They are those Muslims who have most sought for direct personal experience of the Divine...This of course is also a distinctive culture to those who would re-think the Islamic faith courageously in the light of modern demands (*e.g., the Sunnis*).

DIFFERENCES IN PRACTICE

A difference between Christianity and Islamic beliefs and practices is the use of '*Language*'. In Islamic religion, no other language than Arabic may be used in worship. Until recently no translation of the Quran into any other language was permitted. In quite recent times the authorities of the al-Azhar University in Cairo have taken the view that the use of translations of the Quran by non-Arab Muslims is legitimate. But this extends only to non-liturgical use; for all purposes of worship, public and private alike, the Arabic language stands unchallenged and supreme. Here is one of the great bonds of unity in the Islamic world and it secures for the Arabic-

speaking lands their permanent position as the centre of the world of Islam.

One of the main reasons for the overwhelming majority of Muslims in some countries is the almost total lack of religious freedom. In spite of a quotation from the Quran that is frequently heard in the West, that there is no compulsion in religion, in practice Islam is very aggressive towards other religions and allows no freedom of conscience. The most important and fundamental religious concept of Islam is that of *Shari'a* which means a "*path to the watering place*" but in its religious application means "*the total way of life as explicitly or implicitly commanded by God*". Thus many most Islamic Countries uses *Shari'a* as their '*National law*'. Unlike Christianity in which the opposite is the case, Islam is the state religion of Moslem countries and this gives it a strong cultural and political base.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Islam is one of the driving forces among world religions today, its growth closely tied to nationalism (*but growth does not mean truth*). Muhammad, the founder, has based his teaching on inaccurate and false interpretations of the Bible. There is not historical evidence to support Mohammed's contentions that either the Jewish or Christian scriptures have been corrupted. In addition, his teaching in the Quran is based on revelations, which he initially believed were demonic in origin.

And finally, Islam is an aggressive and impressive world religion. It appeals to those who welcome a religious worldview, which permeates every facet of life. However, it is ultimately unfulfilling. The Islamic God of strict judgement, Allah, cannot offer the mercy, love, and ultimate sacrifice on mankind's behalf that the Christian God, incarnate in Jesus Christ, offers to each man even today.