

Introduction to Islam: A Christian Perspective and Appreciation

(Part I)

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Note: The following is the text of a lecture delivered by Fredric W. Bush at the Fuller Theological Seminary entitled: "A Brief History of the Rise and Development of Islam." This is part one of a two part series ([read part two beginning at page 21 below](#))

A. Introduction

It has become commonplace since 9/11, to say that we now live in a new world.

In many ways this is true, and not the least of these ways is the fact that, as the perpetrators of 9/11 made all too apparent, that new world involves a closeness to Muslim people than we have ever known before. Muslims in today's world number some 1.2 billion people, amounting to somewhere between 1/4 to 1/3 of the world's population. The extent of Muslim presence in the world can best be seen in the enclosed map entitled "Percent Muslim by Country". Muslims no longer live in lands far away. There are now more Muslims born in the UK every year than the number who are immigrants. And as a result of immigration in the last 50 years, Muslims in the U.S. now number approximately 8 million. To put this in perspective, this is larger than the total number of the members of Presbyterian and Methodist churches combined. Clearly, Muslims are now close-by members of our shrinking world and fellow citizens in the exceedingly pluralistic society that America has become.

Unmistakably, it is incumbent upon us to enter into dialogue with them so that we may understand who they are and, equally important, so that they may understand who we are.

Yet, in spite of this need, prominent American religious leaders from the right wing of the evangelical and fundamentalist camps have publicly espoused opinions and views that are not just negative, but virtually amount to demonizing Muslims and their faith. Franklin Graham, the son of evangelist Billy Graham, has stated that Islam is "a very evil and wicked religion." And Pat Robertson of TV fame claims Islam is a religion of violence seeking to "dominate and destroy." The Christian Coalition, founded by Robertson, has stated that Muhammad was "a wild-eyed fanatic" and "a killer," and that the Muslim faith is "a monumental scam."

Finally, in the most irresponsible statement of all, on the CBS program "60 Minutes" on Oct. 7th, 2003, Jerry Falwell said, "I think Mohammed was a terrorist. I have read enough . . . by both Muslims and non-Muslims, [to decide] that he was a violent man, a man of war." Such public statements are not only irresponsible, they are also highly inflammatory, as is revealed by the fact that on Oct. 12th ABC News reported that Ayatollah Mohsen Shabestari, a personal representative of Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khameni, called for the three Protestant ministers to be killed for insulting Muhammad.

In the light of such facts as these, and in the light of the fact that the area which is the greatest source of conflict between the largely Judeo-Christian West and the Muslim world is the Arab Middle East, which is overwhelmingly Muslim, I think that it is of utmost importance that we try to understand who Muslims are, what they believe and practice, and how that compares and differs with our beliefs and practices as Christians.

And may I just add that one of my main motives for engaging in such a study is a commitment to spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Here I am in complete agreement with Dr. Victor Makari, Coordinator of the Office for the Middle East and Interfaith Relations of the Presbyterian Church (USA), who said at the Synod Mission Rally two years ago, "We will not win Muslims by invalidating them as persons by denigrating and demonizing their faith." So I want to begin my presentation today with a brief history of the rise and development of Islam, and then spend some time considering the belief and practices of Islam from a Christian perspective and evaluation.

B. Muhammad

a. The World into which Muhammad Was Born.

Muhammad was born about A.D. 570 on the Arabian Peninsula (now Saudi Arabia) in the oasis city of Mecca. The Arabian Peninsula sat on the southern border of the two great empires of the day, the Byzantine empire in the west, ruled from Constantinople, and the Persian empire in the east, ruled from Ctesiphon in Iraq. To support their policies, the Byzantines in the west and the Persians in the east supported and ruled over local princes on the northern borders of the Arabian Peninsula. The Persians controlled the princely dynasty of the Lakhmids in the east, while Byzantium controlled the Ghassanid princes who dominated the region east of Syria and Palestine. Besides this extension of political spheres of influence, there was also a religio-cultural penetration as well. The Ghassanids had long been Christian, and by 600 AD the Lakhmid king had become a Christian. There were also Christians in many of the Arabic tribes and some tribes or sections of tribes in Arabia itself were largely Christian. In the south was the Christian state of Abyssinia (Ethiopia), which had penetrated Southern Arabia (Yemen) both politically and religiously. Also, by about 550 A.D. a number of Arabic tribes and sections of tribes had accepted Judaism, particularly in and near the city Yathrib, later to be known as Medina.

Just before Muhammad was born, war had broken out between the Byzantine and Persian empires, and it continued throughout his life. By 610, when Muhammad was about 40 years old, the Persians had defeated the Byzantine forces, conquered Syria and Egypt, and in 614 they captured Jerusalem. But by 630 the Byzantines had driven the Persians out of Egypt and Syria and forced them to sue for peace. Consequently, by the end of Muhammad's life, both empires were exhausted by more than half a century of warfare.

The western Arabian Peninsula presented the only major trade route by which the important commodities of silk from China and spices from India and Southeast Asia could reach the Byzantine Empire. This fact was due to the fact that Persia controlled both the northern overland route and the sea route through the Persian Gulf. Consequently, as a result of both geography and the needs of war, by the time Muhammad grew up, the city of Mecca had become a fairly wealthy merchant and trading center, profiting from the Byzantine need to use the western trade routes. This relatively new wealthy status of Mecca meant that the old tribal Arabic culture that centered in tribal loyalty and corporate responsibilities was breaking down. In a mad scramble for power and wealth, there was a strong tendency for people to look after their own interests and to disregard the corporate tribal and clan responsibilities formerly recognized.

b. Muhammad's Emergence as a Prophet

Muhammad's family belonged to an impoverished Meccan clan, the Bani Hashim. Though impoverished, the Bani Hashim belonged to the Quraysh, the most important and powerful tribe in Mecca at that time. Muhammad's father died before he was born, and by the time he was 8 years old both his mother and his grandfather had also passed away. Hence, he grew up as an orphan under the care of his uncle Abu Talib, the head of the clan of Bani Hashim. Abu-Talib had a son, Ali, hence Muhammad's cousin. Ali later became one of his closest disciples, and later, as we shall see, the fourth Caliph, or successor to Muhammad, in the Muslim community.

Life was not easy for an orphan in 6th century Mecca, especially since the fortunes of the clan of Bani Hashim seem to have been at a low ebb. Muhammad apparently gained some experience by traveling to Syria with his uncle, Abu-Talib. Later he had to earn his keep by seeking employment in the caravan trade of the merchants of Mecca. At twenty-five years of age, he went into the service of a rich, older widow named Khadijah, who eventually sent him as her agent in charge of a caravan to Syria. When this responsibility proved him trustworthy, she proposed marriage, and he accepted. She bore him two sons, both of whom died in childhood, and four daughters. One of these daughters, whose name was Fatimah, became the wife of his cousin Ali. Only through this union did Muhammad have any male descendants.

From the content of Muhammad's earliest preaching, it appears that the breakdown of the tribal social order in Mecca greatly troubled him, particularly the failure to care for the weaker members of society, such as widows and orphans. By 610, when he was about 40 years old, his concern for the troubles of Mecca made him seek solitude and solace in the loneliness of the desert. He went out to a cave nearby, often several nights at a time, to pray and to meditate. A strange figure, which he later understood to be the archangel Gabriel, appeared to him in this cave and gave him commands. Scholars believe that one of the first of these is preserved in chapter 96, verses 1-5, of the Qur'an:

Proclaim! (or Read!) in the name of your Lord and Cherisher, Who created -
Created man, out of a (mere) clot of congealed blood:
Proclaim! And your Lord Is Most Bountiful -
He Who taught (the use of) the Pen, -
Taught man that which he did not know.

With this may be compared another passage, which is sometimes held to be the first one revealed:

O you wrapped up in a mantle!
Arise and deliver your warning!
And your Lord do you magnify!
And keep your garments free from stain!
And all idolatrous abominations flee.
Give not to gain more,
But in thy Lord's cause
Be patient and constant. (Sura 74:1-7)

Muhammad was at first deeply troubled by these visions, fearful that he was mad, that is, in the ideas of the time, fearful that he was possessed by a spirit or jinn. In the early days, he is said to have been encouraged to believe in the reality of his visions by his wife, Khadijah, and more particularly by her cousin, Waraqah. Waraqah was a Christian, and assured Muhammad that his visions were similar to those received by Moses. At any rate, eventually he became convinced that it was God who was speaking to him and that he was calling him to be a prophet and to proclaim the message that he was receiving.

The content of Muhammad's earliest preaching is difficult to ascertain with certainty, since the Qur'an is not arranged chronologically, but simply by the length of the chapters, the longest being placed first. Nevertheless, it seems reasonably clear that his earliest messages stressed the following four themes:

(1) the goodness and power of God, the creator of all, who has provided human beings with the necessities of life.

(2) In response to the goodness of God, it is incumbent upon humans to express gratitude to God and to worship Him.

(3) Since it is God who has provided all that human beings have, they are not pridefully to amass wealth for themselves, but are to use wealth to feed the destitute and in particular to deal honorably with orphans and other weak persons and not to oppress them. Sura 93:9-11 reads, "Therefore do not treat the orphan with harshness, nor repulse the petitioner (unheard); but the bounty of your Lord - rehearse and proclaim!" In another passage he expressly criticizes the inhabitants of Mecca, "You respect not the orphans; nor do you encourage one another to feed the poor; you devour inheritance - all with greed; and you love wealth with inordinate love" (Sura 89:18-21).

(4) In the fourth theme of his early preaching, he warns his contemporaries that there will be a resurrection and a day of judgment, followed by reward or punishment.

About 613 he began to preach this message publicly in Mecca. He not only called for conversion to the one true God, he also demanded integrity in trade and justice with respect to slaves, women, and orphans. In doing so he put himself in direct opposition to both the wealthy merchants of Mecca and to the Arab tribes in general, even to his own family, who were polytheists and honored various gods. Pilgrimages to the idols at the holy place of the Ka'aba in Mecca, and the religious festivals and trade markets connected with them, formed an important source of income for the upper class of the city. As time went by, the tensions between the leading merchant families and Muhammad and his followers grew in intensity. His early preaching in Mecca gained him nothing but derision, opposition and persecution. It was so bad that in 615 he sent some of his early converts to Christian Ethiopia, where apparently they were well received.

c. Muhammad's Emigration to Medina, the "Hijrah."

In 619 both his wife and his uncle, Abu-Talib died. With the loss of Abu-Talib, the head of the clan of Bani-Hashim, Muhammad lost the protection of his clan. Without such protection, he soon began to experience such persecution from the Quraysh, the leading tribe of Mecca, that he was in fear of his life. Consequently, in 622, feeling increasingly threatened, he accepted an invitation to move to an oasis about 220 miles to the northwest, then known as Yathrib, to be a mediator in the clan warfare that was tearing the city apart. First he sent a number of his followers to Yathrib to prepare the way. Then later Muhammad himself made the emigration from Mecca to Yathrib. He had to do so surreptitiously, hiding in a cave for three days until the hue and cry the Meccans had raised died away. This emigration from Mecca to Yathrib is called the Hijrah, and is the date chosen to begin the Islamic calendar. Yathrib was eventually called Medina, from the designation "madinat an-nabi," "the City of the Prophet."

In Medina Muhammad not only succeeded in ending the warfare between the Arab clans who were feuding over control of the city, he also succeeded in winning most of them to the new faith. Thereby he transformed himself in a few short years from an impotent, persecuted prophet into a relatively powerful ruler of a large and developing community, the "umma," the "community of God." Because of the circumstances in Medina, in which he eventually took over resolution of all legal disputes, the divine instructions he was receiving in the continuing visions gained an increasingly legal character, and he created a community law.

There were also three powerful, Arab-Jewish clans in Medina, who were also included in the negotiations to end the fratricidal strife in the community. Muhammad was convinced that he proclaimed the same faith as the Jews and initially hoped they would recognize him as the promised prophet to come, the Messiah. Upon his arrival in Medina, he signed a pact with the Jewish clans in which they were given religious autonomy provided that they joined the Muslims in the defense of the city. Peaceful relations with the Jewish clans did not last, however. The most serious problem was their opposition to him as a

prophet and their contention on the basis of the Torah that he was falsifying the biblical message. This not only challenged the very heart of his message and identity, but gave support to the Medinans who opposed him.

This serious opposition meant the end of their protective alliance. Judged to have broken treaties, two of the three Jewish clans were expelled from Medina. A third clan, however, was involved in aiding the Meccans in their last serious attack on Medina, known as the Battle of the Trench, hence they were judged to have committed treason. The clan was besieged, and, upon their surrender, all the males were executed and the women and children sold as slaves. Further, to signify a clear differentiation from Judaism, the direction of prayer was changed: Muslims no longer turned toward Jerusalem like the Jews, but rather toward Mecca. Thus Mecca became the center of Islam (see Sura 2.142-150). Muhammad proclaimed that Abraham had erected the first "House of God," the Ka'aba in Mecca, as a place to honor the one God.

d. The Defeat of the Meccans and the Success of Islam

Fighting continued intermittently between the forces of Mecca and the emerging Islamic community in Medina for some six years after his arrival in 622, including a number of pitched battles. However, in 628 the authorities of Mecca bowed to Muhammad's increasing political and religious influence and allowed the members of his community free access to the shrine of Ka'aba for the Muslim month of fasting, Ramadan. Finally, when he himself arrived in Mecca in 630, accompanied by his troops, the residents of Mecca yielded without much resistance. He cleansed the Ka'aba of its idols, and made it into a sanctuary dedicated to Allah.

At Mecca, Muhammad generously forgave his opponents, and by doing so won many new followers among his former enemies. Then he returned to his community in Medina. He made his first and only formal pilgrimage to the holy Ka'aba in Mecca in 632. Muslims making the pilgrimage to Mecca today still follow the ritual to which he submitted himself on that occasion.

Muhammad remained strictly monogamous as long as his first wife Khadijah lived. But in the years following her death, he married again and again, eventually accumulating a total of eleven wives. Among them were a number of widows who were left without means because their Muslim husbands had died in battle, though one was a Christian and one was a Jew. Muhammad justified his unusually high number of marriages by means of special divine permission. Muslims see these marriages as his show of compassion for widows who otherwise had no means of support. In Sura 4:3, permission is given to Muslims to marry as many as four wives, but the conditions are so stringent that the law is taken by many modern Muslim commentators to be an encouragement towards monogamy.

By the time Muhammad died, almost all of the tribes of the Arabian Peninsula had either converted to Islam or had allied themselves to the Muslim community, the new power in the region. He died on June 8, 632, in the home of his favorite wife, Aisha. Not only did

he not have a male heir, but he had not chosen a successor for the leadership of the Umma, the Muslim Community. He was buried in Medina.

e. Muhammad's Significance in Islamic Faith

Muhammad became both a prophet and a politician. In Mecca he appeared as a preacher of judgment and messenger of a renewed faith. In Medina he created a religious community founded upon Islamic belief and Islamic law, and became its ruler and judge. The Islamic state he founded is still the model in Islam today.

The Qur'an teaches that Muhammad was a servant of God, without any superhuman powers, exceptional only in the special duty to be God's prophet and messenger. Sura 41:6 reads:

Say thou: "I am but a man like you: It is revealed to me by inspiration, that your God is One God."

And another passage reads:

Say: "I tell you not that with me are the treasures of Allah, nor do I know what is hidden, nor do I tell you I am an angel. I but follow what is revealed to me." (Sura 6.50)

Thus, mainstream Islam has always maintained that Muhammad was only human, and that the encounter between God and humanity was only completed in the process of the revelation of the Qur'an, not in a person. Thus, Muslims do not want to be called "Muhammadans."

Muhammad saw himself as one in a long line of prophets who were called by God to awaken and renew people in their confession of the one God. In Islamic belief and teaching God's renewed revelation to Muhammad was necessary because the message of the earlier prophets had been altered and falsified as time went by. By contrast with these earlier, altered revelations, the Qur'an was the final, conclusive revelation, for which there was but one text: "In it is guidance sure, without doubt, to those who fear Allah" (Sura 2.2).

The Qur'an expresses the universal and conclusive significance of Muhammad's mission through the image of Muhammad as "the Seal of the Prophets" (Sura 33.40). Beyond this, Muslims in conversation with Christians often refer to a verse in the Qur'an, according to which Jesus is supposed to have announced the coming of one more messenger of God:

And remember, Jesus, the son of Mary, said, "O Children of Israel! I am the messenger of Allah (sent) to you, confirming the Law, which came before me, and giving glad tidings of a Messenger to come after me, whose name shall be Ahmad." (Sura 61.6)

Other proclamations of the Qur'an describe Muhammad as a model for the faithful. Soon the life and sayings of Muhammad were surrounded with particular reverence and had a

strong influence on the piety of Muslims. The profound reverence for everything that had to do with the life of their prophet and the reports that his contemporaries gave of him led to numerous legends, poems, and songs of praise for the prophet. From early on, just saying his name was believed to have a blessed effect. Recently Muhammad's birthday has been gaining importance as a special day, though some object to this on the grounds that remembering it makes too much of a mortal.

In spite of such objections, however, Muhammad gained superhuman qualities in the legends and folk beliefs of common people's piety; they saw him as the perfect Muslim. Mysterious events were reported about his life. It is said, for instance, that his breast had been opened in his childhood and his heart purified so that he would be able to receive the divine revelation unstained. Especially important are a legend of his ascension to heaven and its many-faceted history of interpretation, based upon a single, obscure verse in the Qur'an:

Glory to Allah who took his servant for a journey by night from the sacred mosque to the farthest mosque, whose precincts we did bless, - in order that we might show him some of our signs: for he is the one who sees and hears (all things). (Sura 17.1)

According to the legend based on this verse, Muhammad was carried off to Jerusalem on his heavenly steed (Al-Buraq); from there he ascended through seven heavens into paradise to see the splendor of God. On his ascent he encountered all the prophets who went before him. However, none of these stories are found in the Qur'an, and they do not belong to the Islamic articles of faith and belief.

C. The Spread of Islam

a. The Early Islamic Empire

For the first 30 years after Muhammad's death, the Muslim community was ruled by one of four men who were members of the group who formed his closest associates, called in Arabic "the Companions." Each adopted the name "Khalifa," or "Successor" of Muhammad, from which comes English "Caliph." The first four of the Caliphs was chosen by the consensus of this group of closest associates, with only minor dissent from the group who believed that Muhammad's successor must come from Muhammad's own family. However, with the advent of the fourth Caliph, Ali, a descendant of Muhammad through his mother, Fatimah, a daughter of Muhammad, civil war broke out. This produced the major schism in Islam that has continued to this day. To this we will turn in a moment. These first four Caliphs have become idealized in Muslim tradition as the "rightly guided" or orthodox Caliphs. The fifth Caliph, the victor in the civil war, was a member of the great Meccan clan of Umayya, and succeeded in making the succession to the Caliphate dynastic. As a result, for the next 70 years the developing Islamic state was ruled from Damascus by a succession of Caliphs from this Umayyad family. Consequently, this period of the history of the Islamic state is called the Umayyad Caliphate.

During this first century of its existence, the nascent Islamic state saw a truly remarkable development and expansion. When Muhammad died, he had succeeded in uniting virtually the whole of Arabia under the banner of the Islamic community and faith, either by conversion to Islam or by treaty of allegiance. Under the first four Caliphs, this rule was consolidated and spread. A major tenet of Islamic belief is that it is the true religion for all mankind, and so Muslim converts were soon spreading the new faith in the domains of the northern Arabic tribes, the Ghassanids and the Lakhmids about which we spoke when describing the world into which Muhammad was born. Now, as we noted, these northern Arabic tribes were political dependencies of the Persian and Byzantine empires. Furthermore, conversion to Islam meant allegiance to the Muslim community, or "Ummah." Now the Muslim community at this time was both a political entity as well as a religious community, at the head of which was the Caliph, the Successor to Muhammad. Hence, inevitably conflict soon arose between the new Islamic state and the forces of these two great empires.

The Persian and Byzantine forces were no match for the zealous armies of the new faith, exhausted as they were by more than 50 years of war with one another. By about 650 AD Egypt and Syria in the west and Iraq and much of Iran in the east were in Muslim hands. In the decades following 650, Muslim campaigns spread across North Africa, and in 697 Carthage fell to Islam. In 711 the Berber Muslim general Tariq, who gave his name to Gibraltar (Arabic Jebel Tariq, Mountain of Tariq), crossed from Africa to Spain and defeated the army of the Visigoths. Within 3 years the whole of the Iberian Peninsula came under Islamic rule, except for the Pyrenees in the far north. Soon thereafter Muslim incursions into southern France were occurring.

The furthest point the Muslim armies reached was the city of Tours, a mere 125 miles southwest of Paris. As every school boy from my generation knows, the Muslim advance into Europe was stopped in 732 by a battle near the town of Tours at which Charles Martel defeated the Muslim forces. Eventually the Muslims lost control of southern France, and were driven south of the Pyrenees. Muslim rule in Spain, however, did not completely end until Granada fell to the Spanish monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella in January, 1492, the very year that Columbus sailed west to find a new route to India and discovered the New World. If you will do a little arithmetic, you will soon discover that the Muslim Moors ruled southern Spain for a longer period the Christian rulers have since 1492.

Similar territorial advances were made in the east. Indeed, by 750 AD, a little over a century after the death of Muhammad, the Islamic state had become the largest state that had existed up to that point in human history. They had incorporated the most fertile parts of central Asia, and much of what are now Afghanistan and Pakistan into their empire. This now comprised a single commercial and imperial system.

b. The Further Expansion of Islam

Time does not permit us to speak of the convoluted history of the Islamic world in the centuries that followed. It must suffice to say that by the impact of Muslim trade and

commerce, between 750 and 1500 Islam became the dominant religion in much of the rest of North Africa, the coast of E. Africa and Madagascar, a swath of terrain stretching right across China to the region of Beijing, and another great swath of territory stretching from the coasts of Burma (modern Myanmar) and Malaysia, through the whole huge archipelago that now constitutes Indonesia, to most of the southern Philippines. Finally, from 1500 to the present, Islam has spread elsewhere through the extensive migration of populations that now marks modern history.

C. The Sources of Islamic Faith and Practice

Having looked at the historical development of Islam and its spread in the modern world, let us now briefly consider the sources of Islamic belief and practice. In doing so, we first need to understand that, as we shall see when we come to compare Islam with Christianity, Islamic belief posits that what human beings need is right guidance from God. Indeed, in Islamic belief, this is the reason that God called Muhammad and gave him the revelations he received. Therefore, the first and most important of the sources of right guidance for a life pleasing to God is the book which gives Muslims right guidance, the Qur'an.

a. The Qur'an

Muslims believe that the entire text of the Qur'an was revealed to Muhammad. This revelation did not occur suddenly, but spanned the whole period of Muhammad's life, from about 610, the year of his first visions, to shortly before his death in 632, a span of twenty-two years.

Originally every revelation recited by Muhammad during a certain period was called a Qur'an. These were memorized and some of them written down by those of Muhammad's followers who happened to be present, and soon collections of the revelations were made. Some of them had extensive collections, others less complete.

As more and more collectors and knowledgeable people died in the wars with the non-Islamic Arab tribes following Muhammad's death, Muslims became aware of the danger that one day the knowledge of the revelations could be lost. So the third caliph, Uthman, in 653, twenty years after Muhammad's death, set out to collect a single text of the Qur'an with the help of the most knowledgeable experts. An attempt was made to include all texts recognized as being authentic. In particular they tried to distinguish the true revelations from Muhammad's utterances, which did not originate in the "heavenly source." Through this process, an authoritative Qur'anic text was established. This alone was to be used in performing the worship service, in making judgments in legal disputes, or in deciding theological questions.

Muslims fervently believe that this text, compiled two decades after Muhammad's death, was literally dictated by God to Muhammad in the revelations he received through the archangel Gabriel. However, evidence of the process by which the present text of the Qur'an came into being does exist. Some of this evidence is presented in an article which

my colleague at Fuller, Dr. Dudley Woodberry, has written and which he recently kindly sent me. Dr. Woodberry writes:

This high view of the Qur'an was certainly brought into question by scholars like Arthur Jeffery whose book *Materials for the History of the Text of the Qur'an*, published in 1937 noted the variants in the ancient codices of the Qur'an from manuscripts and quotations in commentaries (1) More recent revisionist theories have been put forward by scholars such as John Wansborough, who considered the Qur'an to be "Salvation History," and to be the result of ideas from the 9th century read back into the 7th century.(2) But these studies were buried in academic books, which were not translated for the Muslim masses. That changed in January 1999 when the *Atlantic Monthly* published an article on Qur'anic manuscripts that had been found in Yemen in Medinan script, making them older than the Kufan texts that the standard Egyptian edition of today used.(3) They indicate a period of editing, for sections in a different handwriting are inserted in places, apparently to correspond with the present order of the chapters and verses. Also, there are many small variants, and there are places where the text says of God "He said" rather than the command "say" that is in today's text. This is harder to reconcile with a dictation view of revelation.(4) Very little has been published; so we must await the detailed results.

An author with the pseudonym Christoph Luxenberg has published a book *Die Syro-Aramäische Lesart des Koran*, which suggests that parts of the Qur'an reflect parts of Syriac lectionaries, and the meaning changes if the vowel pointing of the latter are used.(5) Again, if this information were confined to scholarly books it might not raise Muslim concerns very much, but it was reported on the front page of the *New York Times*.(6)

Currently these materials are interpreted as a Western attack on Islam, but eventually Muslims will have to deal with them though scholars are divided on the conclusions.

The text of the Qur'an is divided into chapters and verses. The chapters are called suras, the meaning of which is still unclear. There are a total of 114 suras. With few exceptions, they are arranged according to length, with the longest suras first.

According to Muslim belief, the Qur'an contains the fundamental knowledge necessary for a life pleasing to God.

b. The "Hadith"(Narrative Tradition) and the "Sunna" (Custom, Practice).

The Qur'an, however, is not the only source of belief and action for Muslims. Very early in the developing Muslim community, it became clear that many situations were arising for which there was no guidance in the Qur'an. Therefore the leaders of the community turned at first to the stories and reports of the example of the prophet Muhammad, his sayings, actions and decisions, in order to provide precedents in making decisions about what was right and pleasing to God. Later this practice was extended as well to the narratives and reports of the sayings and exemplary actions of the first four Caliphs and

the other close associates of Muhammad. These sayings, actions and decisions of Muhammad and the other revered leaders of early Islam are called by the technical term "Sunna," literally "practice, custom." The narratives within which these Sunna are preserved are called by the technical term "Hadith," the nearest English equivalent of which would be "authoritative tradition." The Hadith and Sunna serve as the binding model or custom and as a second source for the correct teaching and behavior of Muslims. These traditions or stories (hadith) were originally passed on orally, but were soon gathered in two or three great collections, which became virtually canonized, and hence recognized as reliable and authoritative.

c. The Shari'a, the Muslim Law

From these collections of Hadith and Sunna, the Muslim Law or Shari'a developed. In the Muslim conception, guidance is absolutely essential to living a life pleasing to God. Hence, within just the first 200 years of its existence, the Muslim community developed principles of jurisprudence and began to codify the rules and laws for conduct into great legal systems covering all areas of life - public and private, communal and personal alike.

However, as time went by, it became clear that the Hadith and Sunna, having originated in the tribal society of the Arabian Peninsula, were also very historically conditioned and could not provide precedents for all the complicated situations of life, especially given the cultural diversity of the developing Muslim empire. So two important principles of interpretation of the Qur'an and the Sunna were introduced.

The first of these is called Qiyas, meaning "analogy," and refers to a limited application of reasoning to law, so that the law can be applied in different circumstances. To give a simple and obvious example, the consumption of wine is regarded as prohibited in certain verses of the Qur'an (e.g. 2:219, 5:90-91). Other alcoholic beverages such as hard liquor are not mentioned, since they were not known in 7th C. AD Arabia. Clearly, by analogic reasoning, however, these beverages are also prohibited, since they too cause intoxication.

The second principle of interpretation is called Ijma', meaning "consensus." This refers either to the consensus of the Islamic community (or that of the qualified council of scholars of a given generation) that a certain action is permitted or prohibited.

Eventually four great schools of the Law of Islam developed, differing primarily in the permissibility and extent of application of the principles of Qiyas, "analogy" and Ijma', "consensus." The schools that were more liberal in applying these principles, named after the jurists who founded them, are the Maliki, used today principally in North Africa and Sudan, and the Hanafi, adopted by the Ottoman Empire and now widespread in India. More conservative is the school of Shafi'i, used in Southern Arabia, from where it spread to East Africa, South India and Southeast Asia. By far the most conservative is the Hanbali school, which limits sources upon which legal decisions can be made to the Qur'an and the Sunna, virtually prohibiting the use of Qiyas, "analogy," and Ijma', "consensus." The Hanbali school of law is primarily in use in the very conservative

society of Saudi Arabia. It has also heavily influenced a number of the Islamic fundamentalist groups that have arisen in recent decades.

Shari'a, then, meaning literally "trodden way or path," is the technical term for the massive system of laws which govern every aspect of Muslim life. In his course "Introduction to Islam," Dr. Dudley Woodberry speaks of it as follows:

It is . . . enjoined by God . . . so that people may be led to life. It can be defined as the totality of God's commands relating to the activities of humans. It is concerned with the whole of a Muslim's life, both private and public. A distinction is made between a person's relations with God and a person's relations with others. Thus, the law books, which discuss the Shari'a, deal with such topics as prayer, fasting and ritual purity, as well as with family life (marriage, divorce, inheritance), contractual law and criminal law, etc.

And in his book, *The Middle East: A Brief History of the Last 2,000 Years*, Bernard Lewis says of the Shari'a:

This magnificent structure of laws, lovingly elaborated by successive generations of jurists and theologians, is one of the major intellectual achievements of Islam, and perhaps most fully exemplifies the character and genius of Islamic civilization. (*The Middle East*, p. 223.)

D. The Major Sects of Islam, The Sunnites and The Shi'ites

Let us conclude this brief survey of the history of Islam by examining the historical developments that produced its two major divisions or sects. Very early in Muslim history a major schism split the community, a schism which persists to this day. This schism is that between the Sunnis and the Shi'ites. Both groups rely on the same confession: "I confess that there is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet." Both believe that the Qur'an is the final revelation from God. Both Sunnis and Shi'ites are not very different in their public practice of prayer, their rituals, and the prescriptions for living that they follow. They also both have adherents who experience their religious devotion by emotion rather than intellect through the experiences and practices of mystical Islam known as Sufism. They differ, however, in three ways: (1) the leadership in Islam, (2) the interpretation of the Qur'an, and (3) the manner in which legal decisions are made.

a. The Sunnis.

The Sunnis form the majority of Muslims in every country except Iran, Iraq and Yemen. The name comes from the Sunna, the model or custom of Muhammad and the leaders of the early Muslim community, which they consider authoritative next to the Qur'an. Historically, Sunnis believe that the leader of the Islamic community or empire (the Caliph) should be chosen by consensus on the basis of his ability to lead. The Caliph thus chosen unites the religious and political leadership of the state in one person, but could in

no respect claim divine authority. With the demise in 1923 of the Turkish Caliph, the ruler of the Ottoman Empire, in the Turkish revolt after WWI, there has not been a Caliph in the Muslim world. Sunnis thus are today primarily identified by their adherence to one of the four major schools of religious law. Most descriptions of Islam are about the beliefs and practices of the Sunnis.

b. The Shi'ites

The Shi'ites originated in an dispute within Islam about who should be the legitimate successor to Muhammad after his death in 632. As we have just noted, the majority of Muslims, later known as Sunnis, agreed to name a Caliph (successor) by the consensus of the leaders of the community. A minority of Muslims disagreed with this decision. They were convinced that Muhammad's successor must come from Muhammad's own family, and that God himself had so decreed. They believed they had found the Caliph chosen by God in Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad. Because these Muslims believed Ali to be the first rightful successor, they were called Shi'at Ali, "the party of Ali," by the Sunnis, hence the name "Shi'ites."

Ali was chosen by consensus as the fourth Caliph after the murder of the third Caliph, "Uthman, a member of the powerful Meccan clan of Umayya. Ali established Kufa in Iraq as his capital. When Ali either would not or could not bring the murderers of "Uthman to trial, civil war broke out, principally between the forces of Ali and those of the governor of Syria, Mu'awiya, a cousin of the murdered "Uthman. To make a long story short, after only five years of rule marred by constant civil war, Ali was murdered in 661 as he emerged from prayer in a mosque in Kufa. He was buried at Najaf in southern Iraq. Mu'awiya successfully took over the Caliphate and then bound the position to his own descendents by decree. But when Mu'awiya's son Yezid succeeded him in 680, Ali's surviving son Hussein raised the standard of revolt from Kufa in Iraq. But, before he could even assemble an army, he and all his family and supporters were treacherously murdered at Karbala in Iraq.

The murder of Hussein brought about the total and permanent separation of the Shi'ites from the rest of the Islamic leadership. Shi'ites today still commemorate the day of Hussein's death, the tenth day of the Muslim month Muharram, with processions and passion plays about both martyrs, Hussein and Ali. Many Shi'ites make a pilgrimage on this day to Hussein's gravesite in Karbala in Iraq. The pilgrims try to relive the martyrdoms of Ali and Hussein. This ritual includes sacrificial songs and self-castigation to the point of bodily harm, often swinging blades on chains against their backs.

All Muslims use the title "Imam" for the person leading prayer in the mosque. For Shi'ites, however, this title has an additional meaning. "Imam" for them designates the single, legitimate leader of Islam, who is descended from Muhammad's family. This understanding has far-reaching consequences, particularly in legal questions and in respect to expectations of the "last things."

Shi'ites believe that the Imam is appointed by God and therefore shares in divine knowledge. He makes the decisive interpretation of religious and secular laws. Even the definitive interpretation of the Qur'an is made only by him. The Imam and his representatives have great influence over the life of the individual and the shape of society and thus also have political power. Although his choice is made by humans, his election is regarded as predetermined by God. He serves as the living carrier of God's law, commissioned by God, and is often therefore seen as sinless.

The Shi'ites are divided into a number of sects, primarily determined by whom they believe the legitimate Imam to be. For our purposes, it is only important to note that the major Shi'ite party is known as the "Twelvers," They recognize a line of 12 Imams starting with Ali (hence the name, the "Twelvers"). They believe that after the 12th, the Imam then went into hiding and will return at the end of time as the savior, known as the Mahdi. They are found as a small minority in most Muslim countries, but they constitute the vast majority in Iran. They also account for some 62% of the population of Iraq, though the Sunnis have been far more influential in the past, since they formed the urban middle class and most of the government. Who will ultimately rule Iraq after the recent war, remains to be seen. Iranians believe that the chief Ayatollah (meaning "Sign of God") is in spiritual contact with the hidden Imam - one reason for the power and influence of Ayatollah Khomeini and his successors.

Especially important in the history of the Shi'ites is their experience of opposition to various Sunni rulers. The feelings of betrayal, of suffering, and of courage to resist characterize their entire lives and color their piety. This is noticeable, for example, in their attachment to personalities and their veneration of the saints.

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Footnotes:

1 Leiden: E. J. Brill.

2 Qur'anic Studies. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.

3 Toby Lester "What is the Koran?" pp.43-56.

4 Email from Jay Smith in London June 27, 1999 concerning interview with Dr. Gerd Puin in Erlangen, Germany, and seeing photocopies of some of the Hijazi manuscripts. Additional information on <http://www.domini.org/debate/home.htm>

5 Berlin: Das Arabische Buch, 2000.

6 Alexander Stille "Scholars are Quietly Offering New Theories of the Koran" NY Times, Mar. 2, 2002, pp. A 1, 19.

Introduction to Islam: A Christian Perspective and Appreciation

Part II: Similarities and differences

by Dr. Fredric W. Bush

Note: The following is the text of a lecture delivered by Fredric W. Bush at Fuller Theological Seminary entitled: The Faith and Practices of Islam and Their Similarities and Differences with Christianity." This is part 2 in a 2-part series. (Read Part I)

A. Similarities

To begin, surely there is much that Christians can agree with in the description we have given of Islamic faith and belief. Indeed there is much in the Five Pillars of Islam to which Christians could give assent.

a. The Five Pillars of Islam

(1) The First Pillar. The first statement of the Muslim confession of faith, the Shahada, "I confess that there is no God but Allah,"? with its absolute commitment to monotheism is surely something with which Christians can concur. The Islamic confession of the one God is virtually no different from the biblical commandment, "I am the LORD your God... you shall have no other gods before me" (Exod. 20:2). This similarity is evidence of the fact that Christianity and Islam - together with Judaism - stand historically in the same monotheistic faith tradition. Nevertheless, within our common faith in one God, Muslims and Christians experience differences. The differences are rooted in different understandings of God's relationship to people. The Qur'an stresses the revelation of God's commands and laws to humans. In the Bible, however, we perceive God as the one who reveals not just laws of conduct to humankind, but himself. God has chosen to reveal himself in personal self-disclosure in Jesus Christ, mediated to us by the Holy Spirit.

The second statement of the Shahada, "and that Muhammad is the Messenger of God," also presents for Christians both areas of agreement and disagreement.

For centuries Christians have had a distorted view of Muhammad. It is time to tear down prejudices and to take account of the historical truth. Even without seeing Muhammad with the eyes of a Muslim, Christians should recognize and appreciate his great historical importance.

One of the common allegations against Muhammad is that he was an imposter, a charlatan, who to satisfy his ambition and greed propagated religious teachings which he himself knew to be false. But such a view renders both his history and the development of Islam incomprehensible. Only a profound belief in himself and his mission explains Muhammad's readiness to endure ridicule, hardship, and persecution, even to the point of assassination, during the Meccan period when there was seemingly no prospect of success. The evidence is strong that he was sincere. We may believe, indeed as Christians

we must believe, that some of his views are mistaken, but these mistakes were not due to deliberate lying or imposture.

For Islam, Muhammad is the "prophet and chosen one of God." The biblical prophets, each in a specific situation, called their people back to obedience and faith in God. Muhammad, too, as a preacher of repentance, called the people in his region to faith in the one God. His message of submission to the holy and just God includes a considerable portion of biblical prophetic proclamation. Thus, Muhammad's call for personal righteousness and holy living, to work for justice and peace in the world, and to care for the sick, the poor and the disadvantaged in society is not only a call that Christians can approve, but Christians and Muslims could and should cooperate in implementing that call in society.

On the other hand, however, Christians cannot recognize the Islamic claim that Muhammad is the "Seal of the Prophets"? and that he brings the conclusive, universally valid revelation by which even the gospel of Jesus Christ would have to be measured. In contrast, Christians confess that God's truth and salvation appeared once and for all time in the person of Jesus Christ, as the Bible testifies. It is distressing to Muslims that Christians cannot see the prophet Muhammad as the seal of the prophets as Muslims do; and it distresses Christians that their confession of Jesus Christ does not strengthen their relationship with Muslims, but rather separates them. Both Christians and Muslims must learn to hold their different and conflicting faith convictions within the bonds of respect and integrity that should mark human communication and interaction.

Islam also sees Muhammad as the religious and political leader of the umma, the community of God. At Medina The Prophet's community became a state with the Prophet himself as sovereign - ruling a people and a place. Thus Muhammad has a similarly comprehensive meaning for Islam as Moses had for his people, as told in the Old Testament. Classical Islam knows no distinction whatsoever of the separation of church and state. This unity of religious and political leadership is foreign to Christians, who do not see Jesus in this way. Indeed, Jesus said, "Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's and unto God the things which are God's" (Matt. 22:21).

(2) The Second Pillar. The requirement for daily prayer, the contents of which praise the perfection and greatness of God and recognize that he is source of all life and all goodness is something to which Christians can give assent, without concurring in the particular physical actions by which Muslim prayer is expressed. Indeed the practice of believing Muslims of praying five times a day far exceeds that of all but the most devout Christians.

For example, when Muslims pray, they repeat over and over again the first sura of the Qur'an, called the Fatiha, or The Opening/Beginning. (See page 1, top half, of the enclosed handout.) There is not a statement in this prayer which a Christian could not pray:

In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful.

Praise be to God, the Cherisher and Sustainer of the Worlds,
Most Gracious, Most Merciful, Master of the Day of Judgment.
Thee do we worship, and Thine aid do we seek.
Show us the straight way, the way of those on whom
Thou hast bestowed Thy Grace,
Those whose portion is not wrath, those who go not astray.

(3) The Third Pillar. The Muslim practice of fasting annually in the month of Ramadan and the purposes for which it is performed is one which Christians can only affirm. Though fasting does not play a large part in either the OT or NT communities of faith, it is a recognized practice. For example, the OT community of faith was required to fast on the Day of Atonement; Jesus fasted for 40 days and nights in the wilderness of Judea; and in Acts 13:1-3 we find the Christian community fasting as an adjunct to the prayer needed to confirm the commissioning of Saul and Barnabas. It has also been used by some Christians throughout Christian history as a means to sharpen both their awareness of and their commitment to God.

(4) The Fourth Pillar. Likewise the 4th pillar, the practice of required giving for the purpose of providing assistance to the poor and needy in the community is also an essential element of Christian obligations.

(5) The Fifth Pillar. Finally, although the Hajj, the pilgrimage, has no counterpart in Christian practice, the purposes for which it is performed, namely to express both devotion to God and the utter equality of all believers, and to examine one's life and resolve to live righteously, can surely only find approval from Christians.

b. The Missionary Calling of Islam

Finally, there is another area of similarity between Muslim and Christian belief and practice that has occasioned not only misunderstanding, but also conflict. This is the fact that the faith commitment of both Islam and Christianity requires that they witness to their faith and attempt to win others to their faith commitment.

In Sura 16:125, the Qur'an itself demands of each Muslim: "Invite (all) to the Way of thy Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious." The term in Islam is dawah and is understood as an invitation to faith. Others are invited to become Muslims, for according to Sura 3:110, Muslims are "the best of peoples evolved for mankind, enjoining what is right, forbidding what is wrong, and believing in Allah." But all recruitment is to take place without the use of force, for in Sura 2.256 the Qur'an also admonishes. "Let there be no compulsion in religion. Truth stands out clear from error."

c. The Islamic Concept of "Jihad"

Probably, the greatest misunderstanding of Islam among Christians is the belief that the opposite is true, namely, that Islam did and does propagate its faith by force. This is most often connected with the view that the Islamic term for this is "jihad," which most people in the west translate as "holy war."

In answer to this, let me let you read what a Muslim scholar has written on the issue. In *A Muslim and a Christian in Dialogue*, Badru Kataregga writes as follows:

Jihad (striving) does not refer to war as an instrument to spread Islam. . . . [For] Islam does not condone spreading the Umma through war. Unfortunately, when non-Muslims try to explain why the Muslim faith was embraced by so many people of the world in a relatively short time, the common reason given is that of the holy war or jihad. The term jihad has often confused non-Muslims and Muslims alike. What is jihad? In the Arabic language, the word jihad is not synonymous with war. Jihad means the exerting of one's utmost power in . . . striving in the cause of God.

The struggle in the cause of God is of three kinds. The first is the struggle against a visible enemy. The second is the struggle against the temptations of the devil. The third is the struggle against one's own passions. While carrying on a jihad, Muslims must strive with their time, knowledge, energy, possessions, talents, and all their resources for the cause of God. This is the true meaning of jihad, which was commanded by Allah and expounded by the Holy Prophet for the faithful to follow. It has a much broader meaning than fighting in battle.

. . . Islam has recognized fighting as lawful for only two purposes: self-defense and restoration of justice, freedom, and peace. Muslims are commanded not to start any aggression, and not to submit to any aggression or oppression from their enemies. The Qur'an teaches, "Fight in the way of Allah against those who fight against you.... And fight them until persecution is no more, and religion is for Allah. But if they desist, then let there be no hostility except against wrongdoers." (Qur'an 2:190-193)

This is the condition of war in Islam. War is not the mission of Islam nor the normal course for the Umma.

B. Differences Between Muslim and Christian Belief.

Dr. Dudley Woodberry, the head of the Islamic Studies program in the School of Intercultural Studies at Fuller, has helpfully expressed the Christian beliefs which a Muslim can affirm by underlining those statements of the Apostles' Creed to which Muslims can give assent, and by leaving those statements to which they cannot give assent without underlining (See page 1, bottom half of the enclosed handout):

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth; And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord; Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary,

suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; He descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit; the holy catholic church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting.

The underlined statements to which Muslims can give assent are really quite extensive.

However, the statements of the Apostles' Creed, which are not underlined, and hence to which Muslims cannot give assent, point out sharply the three major areas where Muslims and Christian faith requires that they disagree.

a. "the Father"

First, Muslims cannot give assent to calling God "our Father." (See page 2, top half, of the enclosed handout.) Though Muslims believe that this would reduce the awesome otherness and transcendence of God, this is not the primary reason for their dissent. Rather, the primary reason is due to the Christian use of the term "Father" as a metaphor to express the nature of the first person of the Trinity, and Muslims believe that the Qur'an explicitly contradicts the Christian conception of the Trinity. Thus, using the translation most commonly read today in the English speaking world, Sura 5:171 says,

Do not say "Trinity": desist: it will be better for you: for Allah is one God."

And Sura 5:73 says,

They do blaspheme who say: God is one of three in a Trinity: for there is no god but one God.

And Sura 5:116 says,

Allah will say, "O Jesus the son of Mary! Did you say to men, "Worship me and my mother as gods in derogation of Allah?" He will say, ". . . Never could I say what I had no right to say."

However, it is in my opinion really quite clear that the Qur'an in these passages is not speaking against the idea of the Trinity as it is understood in Christian theology. In the verses above, the word translated "trinity" is in actuality the ordinary Arabic word for the numeral "three." Therefore, Sura 5:171 literally says, "Do not say "three"; and Sura 5:73 literally says, "They blaspheme who say, "God is a third (one) in a 'three'."

What must be remembered is that Muhammad lived in and preached against the basically polytheistic world of Arabia. Now, the extent of Muhammad's knowledge about Christianity and the Christian world is difficult to assess. But, it is clear that Muhammad never came into direct contact with the canonical scriptures of the Old or New Testament. Rather, his knowledge of Christian scripture, beliefs and practices was sketchy and

second-hand, undoubtedly from oral sources. Now, the language of the third quote above seems to imply that Muhammad thought that Christians believed in a trio of Gods, namely, Allah, Mary and Jesus. Hence, given the polytheistic culture in which Muhammad lived and against which he fought, and given this distorted conception of Christian belief, which he apparently had received, it seems likely that his understanding of the Trinity was really a "tri-theism," Therefore, it is really tri-theism, which is rejected in the Qur'an.

Nevertheless, whether based on a misunderstanding or not, Muslims are inalterably opposed to the Christian concept of the Trinity as a derogation of God's oneness. In witnessing to a Muslim, one ought to avoid the topic of the Trinity at the beginning as much as possible.

b "his only Son our Lord"

Secondly, Muslims cannot give assent to the statement about Jesus, that he is God's only Son, our Lord.

Jesus is highly venerated by Muslims, for he is given a special place among the messengers or apostles of God in the Qur'an. His birth was miraculous, being born of Mary without a human father (Sura 19: 16-28, 3:59). This is further confirmed by the fact that he is called "Son of Mary," an unusual naming in a society where the second part of a man's name is always that of his father not his mother, as was pointed out by the early Muslim commentator Al-Baidawi. He is said to have been given the Holy Spirit by God (Sura 2:87) and is spoken of as the Word of God (Sura 4:171). He is said to have performed many remarkable miracles, including healing the sick and raising the dead (Sura 5:113). He is declared to be among the righteous (Sura 6:85) and to belong to the company of those nearest to God.

However, the Qur'an explicitly denies that he is the Son of God. Sura 112, which is regularly recited in the prayer ritual, which, you will remember, is repeated five times each day says,

He is God, the One and Only, the Eternal God. He does not beget; nor is He begotten; and He has no equal.

Further, Sura 9:30 says,

The Christians call Christ the Son of God. . . . In this they but imitate what the unbelievers of old used to say.

And in Sura 5:72 we read,

They do blaspheme who say, "God is Christ the son of Mary." For Christ said, "O Children of Israel, worship God, my Lord and your Lord." . . .

In the explicit teaching of the Qur'an, Jesus was not divine, but stands in the line of the great messengers of God like Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Muhammad. Sura 5:75 says,

Christ the son of Mary was no more than a Messenger.

And Sura 43:59 states that Jesus is,

. . . no more than a servant: We granted Our favor to him, and We made him an example to the Children of Israel.

c. "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; He descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead."

Thirdly, Muslims do not give assent to what Christians mean by the statement in the Apostles Creed that Jesus "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; He descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead."

Christians understand that these statements of the creed refer to the Christian conviction that Jesus' death on the cross was in atonement for human sin. This raises two questions. The first is a historical one, namely, what does the Qur'an say and what do Muslims believe about how, when and why Jesus died? The second one is a theological one, namely, since Muslims deny the atonement, what is the Muslim view of salvation?

(1) The Death of Jesus. (See page 2, bottom half, of the enclosed handout.)

The Qur'anic treatment of Jesus' death is fraught with difficulties, since its statements seem contradictory. First, there are verses that clearly speak of Jesus' death. Thus, Sura 3:56 says,

"Oh Jesus! I cause you to die and then exalt you to myself and purify you from their calumny."

And in Sura 19:33/34 Jesus says,

Peace be upon me the day I was born, the day I die, and the day of my being brought back alive.

Now, in just a few verses preceding this passage (v. 15), Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, invokes the same blessing on his son John. Hence the language certainly implies a real death and resurrection in each case. That seems clear enough. But then Sura 4:157-58 reads:

As for their (i.e. the Jews) claim that they killed the Messiah Jesus...they did not kill him, nor did they crucify him. It (or he) appeared so to them. There is a lot of doubt about this matter among those who are at odds over it. They have no real knowledge but follow

only surmise. Assuredly, they did not kill him. On the contrary, God raised him to Himself.

It is generally understood by Muslim commentators that the language here denies the crucifixion, but they differ as to what actually happened. A common interpretation is that a substitute who was made to look like Jesus was crucified in his place, and Jesus was taken alive to heaven. Other commentators reconcile this passage with the other passages that speak of Jesus' death by adopting the view that the passages that speak of his death refer to his second coming (a belief in Jesus' second coming is almost universal among Muslims).

We need not go any further into the involved controversy in Muslim writing about what actually happened to Jesus. Whatever view they take, the common conclusion of Muslims is, as Kenneth Cragg summarizes it, "historically Jesus did not die, morally he should not die, and theologically he need not die."

(2) The Muslim Concept of Salvation. (See page 3 of the enclosed handout.)

The Muslim conviction that theologically Jesus need not die brings us to the Muslim denial of the need for atonement and hence to the second question, namely, what is the Islamic concept of salvation? Here the matter can be stated rather succinctly. First, the Qur'an gives an optimistic analysis of the human condition. Speaking to Muslim believers, Sura 30:30 says,

"So set your face to the religion as a person of pristine faith (hanif)--the state of natural purity (fitra) in which He created people. There is no changing of the creation of God."

This diagnosis of the human condition receives further support in the most authoritative collection of "Hadith" ("Tradition") about Muhammad, where he is quoted as saying,

"No child is born except in a state of natural purity (fitra) and then his parents make him Jewish, Christian, or Magian.

This perspective is mirrored by contemporary Muslim writers, such as Badru Kateregga, who has written in one publication,

"Muslims believe that man is fundamentally a good and a dignified creature. He is not a fallen being" (Islam and Christianity, p. 109)

In this view of the human condition, human nature does not need divine transformation to do that which is right, only divine guidance. After Adam is driven from the Garden of Eden, he is promised guidance from God and freedom from fear if he follows that guidance (Qur'an 2:38-39).

Since the Qur'an portrays the human predicament as primarily ignorance rather than evil, as in the biblical analysis, Muslims believe that to do the right they need only proper

knowledge and guidance, not a savior. Therefore, the biblical dimension of the saving work of Christ is unnecessary in Muslim thought. In fact, only once does the Qur'an use the word najat (salvation). Sura 40:40-41 says,

. . . [H]e that works a righteous deed - whether man or woman - and is a believer, such will enter the Garden of Bliss. . . . O my people! How strange it is for me to call you to salvation while you call me to the fire!

Clearly in the context here, the salvation involved is achieved by righteous works and right belief. One cannot help but remember in this regard the words of James 2:19,

You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe - and shudder.

In another publication the Muslim author Kataregga puts it this way,

Islam does not identify with the Christian conviction that Man needs to be redeemed. The Christian belief in the redemptive sacrificial death of Christ does not fit the Islamic view that man has always been fundamentally good, and that God loves and forgives those who obey his will" (A Muslim and A Christian in Dialogue, p. 175)

In a course on Introduction to Islam that I attended recently, my colleague at Fuller, Dudley Woodberry, very helpfully expressed the significant differences between Islam and Christianity this way.

Both religions are committed to the belief that human beings stand in desperate need of the Word of God. In Muslim belief, the Word of God became a Book, the Qur'an, by means of the divinely appointed messenger Muhammad. In Christian belief, the Word of God did not become a book but is a Person, who became flesh in Jesus Christ. The Book, the Bible, provides the divinely guided interpretation and meaning of that event.

Both religions are committed to the belief that human beings need to be accepted by God. In Muslim belief, human beings are fundamentally good and only need the knowledge of right guidance provided by the Word as Book and the example of God's Messenger to earn God's acceptance through right action and sincere belief in the One God and his prophet. In Christian belief, human beings are not fundamentally good, but inherently sinful. What human beings need is not simply knowledge, but redemption. Therefore, as the Apostle Paul puts it in Romans 3:20-22, no human being will be justified in God's sight by works of the law, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. What human beings need is the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ, the righteousness provided by the atonement for sin wrought by Jesus on the cross.

We could diagram that this way:

Both Islam and Christianity postulate that human beings need "Revelation," the Word of God. But how "Revelation" is acquired differs radically in the two faiths:

Islam
The word of God
through Muhammad
became book,
the Qu'ran

Christianity
The Word is a Person, the Son of God;
in Jesus Christ the Word
became Flesh;
The Book, the Bible, provides the
authoritative interpretation

Both Islam and Christianity postulate that human beings need acceptance by God,
"Salvation." But how "Salvation" is acquired differs radically in the two faiths:

Islam
Humanity, fundamentally good,
needs only knowledge and guidance
provided by
the Word as Book
and the example of Muhammad

Christianity
Humanity, fundamentally sinful,
needs redemption and empowerment
provided by faith in the atonement of
the Word as Person,
Jesus Christ, the Righteous

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(Note: The following books were used to prepare this survey. It should be noted that I have not used any footnotes, even though I have often used material verbatim from these texts.

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Nazir-Ali, Michael. *Islam: A Christian Perspective*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983.)