

The *SBJT* Forum: Key Issues for Understanding Islam and Muslims

Editor's Note: Readers should be aware of the forum's format. D. A. Carson, George W. Braswell, Jr., Joost Pikkert, and Samuel Shahid have been asked specific questions to which they have provided written responses. These writers are not responding to one another. The journal's goal for the Forum is to provide significant thinkers' views on topics of interest without requiring lengthy articles from these heavily-committed individuals. Their answers are presented in an order that hopefully makes the forum read as much like a unified presentation as possible.

SBJT: What are some of the most important things you think that Christians should know about Islam and about Muslims?

D. A. Carson: Owing not least to 9/11, countless thousands of Christians have taken it upon themselves to become better informed about Islam. Books and essays pour from the presses, some of them quite outstanding, others quite frankly poor or misinformed.

I am a little hesitant to provide a list of "the most important things" Christians should know, partly because that sort of list should look different according to the shape of Islam in various parts of the world (for example, the shape of Islam in a totalitarian kingdom like Saudi Arabia is rather different from the shape of Islam in a more-or-less democratic but heavily Muslim country like Turkey), partly because the contents of the list should vary according to what Christians already know about Islam, and partly because the list should vary according to the nature and frequency of the contact we enjoy with Muslims. What a Christian living in Lincoln, Nebraska, needs to know about Muslims may not be exactly the same thing as what should be known by Christians living in New York City or

Islamabad.

Still, one must start somewhere.

(1) In its own way, Islam is as varied as is the world of Christendom. Just as a fundamentalist in southern Indiana would not want to be tainted with the views of, say, a liberal Catholic in Holland, and might protest that the views of the liberal Catholic do not represent true Christianity, so Muslims may vociferously disavow and condemn the views of many other Muslims. The common allegiance to Islam did not prevent Iraq from attacking Iran or trying to take over Kuwait.

(2) Many of us have become mildly informed about the Sunnis and the Sufis, and perhaps about the Wahhabism of the Saudis. But there is another kind of distinction that is at least as important—the distinction between the well-informed Muslim (of whatever group) and what for lack of a better expression we might call the street Muslim. Many street Muslims around the world think that the Christian doctrine of the Trinity stipulates that God copulated with Mary to produce Jesus: the Trinity is God, Mary, and Jesus. They find the notion bizarre, and I agree. It is also not what Christians believe. A well-informed Muslim would not labor under such a delusion, of course. But just as there

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are many “Christians” who are wrong about pretty elementary components of the Christian faith, let alone about the religions of others, so there are countless Muslims who are socially and culturally committed to Islam, without having much theological grasp of its teachings, and still less of the teachings of Christianity. Just as there are conservative Christians who may know a fair bit about their own heritage but almost nothing about anyone else’s, so there are devout Muslims who are adequately informed about their own faith, but whose knowledge of the religious beliefs of others is vanishingly small. And just as some Christians do not know the Bible, so some Muslims do not know the Qur’an. Muslims deny, of course, that Jesus rose from the dead. Many street Muslims also insist that Jesus did not die on the cross, but that he was rescued by his disciples and lived for many years in relative seclusion. Certainly that is affirmed in the Qur’an—once. But the Qur’an in three other places seems to affirm that Jesus *did* die on the cross. Well-informed Muslims will know more of this debate. My point is that we must distinguish between the knowledge of Islam exemplified by street Muslims and the knowledge of Islam displayed by well-read believers, let alone by Muslim scholars.

(3) More so than Christians, Muslims tend to rely pretty heavily on the weight of history to buttress their self-identity and theological reasoning, but under close inspection it is a highly selective history. Most Muslims can tell you about the injustice of the Crusades. They are eager to remind you of the time when the Arab world was academically way ahead of Europe, and list the injustices intrinsic to the colonization of some Muslim powers

(e.g. Egypt) or to the destruction of the Ottoman Empire. On the other hand, Muslim collective historical memory tends to ignore other historical data, and it is becoming important for Christians to bone up on some of this history. For her first three centuries, the church expanded throughout the Roman Empire and beyond by means of witness, suffering, martyrdom, and courage; by contrast, the first three centuries of Islam was characterized by a triumphant rise to power by means of armed violence and brutal suppression. Three of the four “Rightly Guided Caliphs” who succeeded Muhammad were assassinated, the last by his own followers. Yes, the West was guilty of horrible slaughter during the Crusades. But of course, the “holy lands” that the West wanted to recover were taken by Muslims under force of arms, and the Christians were trying to take them back. What Muslim feels that the initial Muslim conquest of Palestine is something of which to repent? During the Crusades the savage slaughter was evenly matched by both sides. But by and large, Christians look back on the Crusades as a mistake, a tragic lapse, even if (initially) well motivated; it is impossible to find similar Muslim regret or repentance. (And it is worth observing that the Spaniards did succeed in taking back their own country from the Moors.) As far as Christian and Muslim response is concerned, the history of slavery is somewhat analogous. Approximately eleven million Africans were shipped as slaves to America; about thirteen million were shipped up the Persian Gulf into Arabia. Two centuries and more later, an enormous literature has arisen in the West that probes our guilt, submerges itself in introspection, and regrets the inconsistency between our religious claims and

our conduct. But I know of no similar body of guilt literature in the Muslim world. Indeed, slave trading was first suppressed in the Arab world by British gunboats, but continued in many circles well into the twentieth century. Muslims want you to believe that whenever they have been in power, they have been broadly tolerant toward Christians and Jews. The element of truth in this claim is that various totalitarian Muslim regimes were sometimes more tolerant than their official policy dictated. Nevertheless the standard policy across the centuries, and usually put into practice, is that Christians and Jews were free to practice their respective religions, so long as (a) they never said anything that could be judged to denigrate Islam or the Prophet; and (b) they did not proselytize any Muslims. Meanwhile, they faced a constant barrage of taxation and other regulations that reminded them of their second-class status. And if a non-Muslim converted to Islam, to leave Islam at that point was apostasy, and warranted the death penalty. When Islam pushed its way into Eastern and Central Europe, it devised a military system known as the *Devshirme*, which involved the abduction by force of young Christian boys in Europe, forcing them to Islamize, and constituting them into an elite army corps. Not many people seem to be listening, but Muslims trying to impose *Shariah* in Nigeria have killed about six thousand Christians during the last few years, and almost ten thousand more in Indonesia. And what shall we say of the two million slaughtered in southern Sudan, where Islam mixes with tribalism and oil revenues to make a ghoul-ish brew? No less frightening is the state of education in almost all of the Muslim world (see especially Hanada Taha-

Thomure, *Academic Freedom in Arab Universities* [Lanham: University Press of America, 2003]). The entire Arab world translates about 330 foreign books into Arabic per year; the total number translated since the ninth century being about 100,000—about the same number that Spain translates into Spanish *each year*.

(4) It is extraordinarily important to recognize that Western Christians in particular, and Muslims worldwide, deploy astonishingly different categories. There are no “clergy” in Islam, as the term is understood in most Christian denominations. The *uelema* are professional men of religion, in the sense that they are certified and given the task of upholding and interpreting the Holy Law, but there is no priesthood, and there are no sacraments or ordinances or rituals that only the *uelema* may perform. Above all, there is no distinction between “church” and “state.” That distinction, axiomatic in the West, goes back to Jesus himself (“Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s . . .”). Often in the West the distinction has been observed in the breach, but the tension between church and state has never disappeared in Christian thought, and ultimately became one of the planks that made representative democracy possible. As a result, informed Christians struggle with the tension between the “already” (Christ rules *already*) and the “not yet” (we live with many kinds of hopes still unfulfilled, because Christ’s rule is still contested, and we have *not yet* reached the new heaven and the new earth). We live with tensions when church and state make mutually conflicting claims, and when in the worst cases we must choose disjunctively, we side with God, and take whatever punishment the state doles out. But in Muslim thought, there is no notion of

“church” set over against state. All must bow to the will of Allah. The *ummah*, the people of Allah, run across all national state lines, so that statehood and nationhood are not nearly as important in Islamic thinking as the *ummah*, the people of Allah. (The irony, of course, is that nevertheless some Muslim states have taken up arms against other Muslim states!) For most well-informed Muslims today, the Christian distinction between church and state is part of the problem: it gives rise to the endless demands to secularize, which is in fact the de-godding of God, the genesis of all idolatry and immorality. Thoughtful Muslims are today less afraid of the West because it is (or was) ostensibly Christian, than because it is so deeply immoral and secularized. And they do have a point! Yet the solutions that thoughtful Christians will advance to the moral and spiritual decline of the West are not the same as those advanced by most thoughtful Muslims. Indeed, this refusal to allow a distinction between “church” and “state,” and this fear of philosophical modernization (let alone postmodernization), have inspired some of the conservative reformers in Islam, such as Sayyid Qutb (1906-66; he was executed in Egypt on charges of treason, specifically for planning the assassination of President Nasser), who have insisted that the route to the blessing of God is to return to an ever deeper and more consistent devotion to Islam, and to refuse to be contaminated by these Western perversions. It is no accident that of the thirty-eight or so Muslim or predominantly Muslim nations, only one is fairly thoroughly democratic in governance (viz. Turkey), and that nation is of course by far the most secularized (the heritage of Kemal Ataturk)—and there is

substantial pressure there to reduce these secularizing trends. Malaysia comes close, but although the Chinese population in Malaysia enjoys fair religious freedoms, the Malay population is deeply Muslim, and Malays who convert openly are in considerable danger. (On these and many other points, one might profitably read two books by Bernard Lewis, viz. *What Went Wrong? The Clash between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2002]; and *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror* [New York: Modern Library, 2003].)

(5) The last two points bring us to another reality that Christians must recognize. Around the world, Muslims simultaneously feel both superior and victimized. They are convinced that they have the final revelation, and their theology tells them that they should be advancing, and becoming number one in the world. On the other hand, their progressive military defeats across the last three and a half centuries, and their geopolitical insignificance until the rise of big oil gave them big bucks, have conspired to make them feel victimized by the West. Anything that is wrong in their world is easily blamed on the West. This is all the easier to accomplish, of course, because most media outlets in the Muslim world are strenuously controlled. The combination of a sense of moral superiority and profound victimization is lethal.

(6) When Muhammed first had his visions and tried to persuade the citizens of Mecca, he was opposed and persecuted. That phase of his pilgrimage produced many utterances on the importance of religious tolerance. Eventually he was driven out and went to Medina, where in due course he became both the religious and political leader. By force of arms, he

gained total power in Medina, and eventually imposed his will on Mecca the same way. That phase of his pilgrimage generated another set of utterances, having to do with the extermination of opponents after they have been given the opportunity to convert and refused. That is why the Qur'an includes both kinds of utterances. But some Muslims think that the Prophet's move from Mecca to Medina is properly paradigmatic: when they are in the minority, they ought to appeal to tolerance; when they are strong enough to take control, they ought to crush opposition, for this too honors Allah, under the fresh circumstances. Policy makers in the Western world are simply naive if they do not recognize these common theological commitments.

(7) Throughout the world, countless Muslims are being converted to Christ. Some of them are secret Christians. Many become Christians in the Muslim "diaspora": I have personally met hundreds of Iranians living in many cities around the world who have become Christians, often in the context of remarkable dreams of Jesus Christ. (Incidentally, a friend in Indonesia, greatly experienced in Muslim evangelism, has told me how effective he finds it to expound Matthew 1-2, precisely because there are five dreams plus the testimony of angels. What the secularized West finds vaguely embarrassing, dreams and visions and angels, may in God's providence be the singular means of grace and conversion in some other part of the world.) Reliable reports say that there are more Christians today in Iran than at any time in the last one thousand years. The most populous Muslim country, Indonesia, is also probably the country with the most fruitful evangelism of Muslims (at least on some of its

islands). It is even possible that the unending drum of violence prosecuted by Islamic fundamentalists may, in the fullness of time, so alienate fellow Muslims that this will turn out to be preparation for the gospel.

(8) We cannot effectively bear witness to Christ among the Muslims we know in our communities unless we love them—and that means befriending them, getting to know them, treating them with courtesy and respect, learning their culture and customs, inviting them to meals, and enjoying hospitality in their homes, too. We must get to know them; they must get to know us. And if you have not read anything at all along the lines of encouraging outreach to Muslim neighbors, then of the increasingly voluminous literature I think I would recommend, as a matter of first choice, the book by Tony Payne, *Islam in Our Backyard: A Novel Argument* (Kingsford: Matthias, 2002), as the place to start.

(9) We need to understand how different the structure of salvation is in Islam compared with the structure of salvation in Christianity. Muslims and Christians differ not only on central matters such as Christology and the resurrection of Jesus, but on equally fundamental matters of grace and merit. Especially on the street, it is common to be told by devout Muslims that keeping the Ramadan fast perfectly and absolutely is the most important duty, or one of the most important duties, before God. By contrast, controlling the heart is a relatively small thing, like good manners. A Thai Muslim recently averred to a friend of mine that reading the Qur'an in Arabic, which she can read but not understand, earns much extra credit, especially during the feast of Ramadan. By contrast, reading the Qur'an in a Thai translation

would be a waste of time: there would be no extra merit. Contrast this with the importance of intelligibility in Paul's estimate of things (1 Corinthians 14). If by hearing the Word we have faith, if by knowing the truth we are set free, if by grace through faith we are saved, then from a biblical perspective Islam is a profoundly alien religion. Understand this, and weep, and evangelize.

SBJT: Since the nineteen Arab Muslim terrorists attacked the United States on September 11, 2001, Americans have asked, "Why would any Muslim do such a thing? Is there anything in Islam which would promote such hatred and violence?"

George W. Braswell: President Bush and world leaders have spoken of Islam as a peaceful religion. Muslim leaders asserted that the acts of the terrorists were not representative of Islam. Observers noted that the great plurality of Muslim peoples worldwide live in peace with their neighbors.

What sense can one make of a senseless act by nineteen hijackers of four planes, which resulted in the deaths of thousands within minutes, when later evidence confirms their doing it in the name of Allah their god and on the basis of their religion? Not only Osama bin Laden but numerous Muslims in various lands and cultures applauded the terrorist act and called for more acts of violence against the Western world, Jews, and Christians.

Islam is a religion that teaches that the Muslim god, Allah, is compassionate and merciful. It teaches that one should have good relations with neighbors. Islam is also, however, a religion of some fourteen hundred years that has a history of war-

fare, violence, and militancy against its neighboring tribes and nations. Muhammed, the founder of the religion, assumed the roles of prophet, nation-builder, and commander-in-chief as he led his warriors to subdue other tribes and peoples and to establish the beginnings of the Islamic empire. He promised rewards of paradise to those who battled the enemy in a jihad and became martyrs. The martyrs in jihad did not have to wait for the day of judgment, for they went directly to paradise.

In recent times, Ayatollah Khomeini established the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1980 and for eight years fought a war against its neighbor, Iraq, a jihad against the infidel regime of Saddam Hussein in which hundreds of thousands of soldiers were promised the rewards of paradise in their martyrdom on the battlefield. Hundreds of thousands died in this Islamic jihad. In addition, Ayatollah Khomeini declared America "The Great Satan" and launched his brand of militant Islam around the world.

The Islamic sectarianism of Wahabism, founded in Saudi Arabia in the 1700s, has informed the minds and hearts of countless Muslim Arab preachers and religious schools in Saudi Arabia. Wahabism has been exported as a missionary movement throughout the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and North America. Its interpretations and applications of Islamic law (*shariah*) have influenced Osama bin Laden and many others in a violent jihad against the Western world, Jews, Christians, and Muslims who do not follow its brand of Islam. Along with its preachments and actions of a militant jihad, it also offers instant paradise to those who become martyrs.

What, then, are the sources in Islam for teaching and promoting militancy and

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martyrdom? Three major sources are the Qur'an (scripture), Hadith (sayings and deeds of Muhammed which serve as positive examples for all Muslims), and Shariah (laws and traditions which inform Muslim behavior both individually and collectively).

The Qur'an has many verses for killing and doing violence to the enemies of Allah. The Hadith provide many examples and statements of Muhammed as he commanded the death of others, as he led his warriors into battle killing individuals and destroying all the males of non-submissive tribes. The Shariah is a complex system of laws which include the principles and methods of warfare.

Islam is a religion based on a high view of its authority and of its superiority as a system not only of religion but of principles of politics, economics, social behavior, family, hygiene, and relations to peoples such as Jews, Christians, and other religious groups. Classical expressions of Islam have fostered a worldview of Islam, with its systems of authority, superiority, and dominance, over against and in competition and battle with the world of the infidel, the ignorant, and the corrupt.

The practice of jihad is paramount to the success of the dominance of Islam. Individual jihad is accomplished through the Muslim belief and practice of confession, prayer, giving, fasting, and pilgrimage. Through this jihad the Muslim witnesses to non-Muslims and invites them to accept Islam. Militant jihad is accomplished by an individual or a group or nation who respond to an official command (*fatwa*) issued by an Islamic authority to go on the attack against the enemies of Islam. Muslim armies, specific groups of Muslims, and Muslim individuals are

promised paradise if they sacrifice their lives in the worthy jihad of Islam. They become martyrs (*shahid*).

Historically, when Islam has been dominant within a population and has political authority and power, non-Muslims, such as Jews and Christians, have been protected as minorities with certain rights and privileges and with certain restrictions. A major restriction is that no Muslim may have the freedom to choose Judaism or Christianity and that Christians, especially, may not proselytize among Muslims. The penalty for a Muslim who leaves Islam is to be declared an apostate, with possible excommunication from family and community and even death.

Americans still ask if Islam is a peaceful religion and why there is such violence propagated in the name of Allah and Islam. Millions of Muslims live peacefully with their neighbors. At the same time the preachments of Islamic leaders in the mosques and schools and other associations hold up Islam as the superior system for worldview and behavior and condemn the outsiders, especially the West, Christianity, Judaism, and corrupted Muslim leaders as deserving to be attacked, subdued, defeated, and even killed.

Americans wonder how many of the one billion plus Muslims in the world really side with the militancy of Muslim terrorists. Americans question why there has been so little protest by Muslim leadership around the globe against the killing of various nationalities and religious peoples in the World Trade Center, various embassies, restaurants, crowded streets, airplanes, churches, synagogues, temples, and mosques. Americans ask if the very core and substance of Islam give

rise to militancy and martyrdom, flowing out of the Qur'an, the Hadith, the Shariah, and the historical movement of Islam.

Islam has a favored place in its sources and traditions for Jesus Christ. It considers Jesus a most revered prophet, a messiah, and the virgin born son of Mary. However, it absolutely denies that Jesus was the Son of God, denies the Trinity, denies the crucifixion and death of Jesus on the cross, and denies the physical resurrection of Jesus from the grave. Therefore, Islam teaches no need for the salvation offered in Jesus' atonement on the cross for all of humanity.

Islam views Christians as basically inferior people with a corrupting and distorting religion. Islam has no biblical references to Jesus riding into Jerusalem in his latter days on the back of a donkey. This is weakness. Their Muhammed rode on the backs of stallions and camels as a warrior and commander-in-chief, slaying and capturing the outsiders. Islam has no story, as in the Bible, of Jesus telling Simon Peter to put up his sword in the garden after he has cut off the ear of the high priest's servant. Jesus himself carried no sword. And Islam does not have the story of Jesus' words from the cross to forgive those who crucified him. This is the way of the cross for Christians. For Islam it is unheard of.

As a Christian I have met many wonderful Muslims in many lands and enjoyed times together around tables of food and friendship in their homes and mine. Muslims have told me of their religion and Muhammed. I have shared my faith in Jesus Christ and the love and salvation of God in Him. I have offered to Muslims a person, Jesus Christ, not a system of religion. Muslims have offered to me a system built upon the Qur'an, the

Hadith, and the Shariah. Within it are the elements of militancy and martyrdom that are seen in world events today.

SBJT: Since many "folk Muslims" who become Christian say that Christians and Muslims serve the same God, just differently understood, isn't it natural to presume the God of the Christians and Muslims is the same God?

Joost Pikkert: At the outset, the reader needs to be aware that there are many orthodox Muslim Background Believers (MBBs) who loathe the Allah of their pre-conversion experience. In trying to analyze the concern raised by the above question, therefore, the following factors need to be considered: (a) Which MBB is making this statement, and what was their pre-conversion conception of God?; (b) What does the phrase "differently understood" mean to the MBB?; and (c) What does conversion indicate?

Muslims of the world vary widely in their understanding of Islam and the nature of Allah. Because one of the key tenets of the Islamic faith is to read the Qur'an in Arabic, Allah's language of choice, the understanding of orthodox Islamic doctrine by many of the world's Muslims is grossly colored by folk beliefs. My experience among folk MBBs of Southeast Asia is that sometimes their understanding of God more closely mirrored the concept of the Creator God of their traditional folk belief system than that propounded by orthodox Islam. When this was the case, and if their understanding of God had not focused on consciously rejecting Jesus Christ but on the character of God as "Allah, the Most Gracious, Most Merciful ... the Cherisher and Sustainer of the worlds ... Master of the Day of Judgment" (Surah 1: 1-4), the

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perception of Allah being similar to the God of the Bible may be a fair approximation, in the sense of the Creator and Sustainer of the universe.

The post-conversion statement of the similarities between the God of Islam and the God of the Bible among folk Muslims, when Christ was not consciously rejected as the manifestation of God's glory, could be likened to early Jews becoming Christians, obviously with a number of key differences. When they embraced the greater revelation of God through Jesus Christ, they acknowledged that God had chosen to give them a profound revelation of himself and his glory through Jesus Christ. In the same way, the conversion from Islam to Christianity by folk Muslims could also be viewed as embracing the new revelation of God through Jesus Christ. Has their perception of God changed? Absolutely. Was it correct before their conversion?—only to the degree that it had not strayed from God's general and special revelation.

The phrase "differently understood" indicates as much about the searching heart as it does about the God Muslims serve. Many Muslims want to understand the character of God, if for no other purpose than to maximize their chances of going to heaven. The fact that so many Muslims admit a post-conversion difference in their understanding of God indicates that the God they now worship is differently conceived than the old "Allah." The ontological reality of God has not changed but the understanding of who the true God is may be so different as to be tantamount to a change in the deity being worshipped. "Differently understood," therefore, is rooted not only in coming to know God as he truly is, but also in the relational change the incarnation brings to our relationship with God.

The MBB is now an insider of God's elect family and can enjoy with abandon the glory of God as defined by his attributes and names instead of fearing it at the last judgment.

Much of the inter-religious dialogue attempts to find common ground by focusing merely on social issues and similarities in theology while, sadly, avoiding the crucial differences between Islamic and Christian theology. While there may be many similar social concerns and overlapping linguistic descriptions of the attributes between the God of the Bible and the Allah of Islam, the crux of the issue lies in what one rejects. The Muslim fossilizes God's revelation of himself when he rejects the manifestation of God in Jesus Christ as normative. While Muhammed's move away from polytheism to monotheism may be heralded, his radical rejection of the Trinity and incarnation makes it impossible for his revelations to have come from the God of the Christian faith.

The key concern, therefore, for anyone witnessing to Muslims is the conception of God in the mind of the individual Muslim. Do they understand orthodox Islamic theology? Have they consciously rejected the revelation of God through Jesus Christ as the Qur'an does? If Jesus Christ has been consciously rejected as representing God's glory in bodily form, the Muslim may be stating *limited, true statements* about God as the sole Creator, but not worshipping the trinitarian God *as he actually is and desires to be known*—as our *Father* in heaven (a name missing from the ninety-nine Islamic names of God). They know enough to be condemned, but not enough to be saved (Rom 1 and 2).

When trying to find common ground with Muslims, it is impossible to freeze our understanding of God merely to the

revelation of himself that preceded Christ, because his further revelation through Christ clearly accentuates the differences between the Allah of Islam and the God of the Bible. Using this important observation from progressive revelation, it is vitally important when witnessing to a Muslim to question whether hypothetically they believe God is powerful and great enough to reveal himself in history through a person. If the Muslim rejects the fact that God's progressive revelation in history did include a display of himself in the incarnation, he is in effect worshipping a fossilized version of the Creator God—a largely lifeless idol—a Muslim-made creation distorted by theological prejudices. In this case the God of the Bible and the God of Islam are grossly dissimilar. The inability to imagine and believe in the trinitarian nature of God is the litmus test for Christians trying to decide the nature of the deity served by Muslims. If, however, because of a lack of understanding of orthodox Islam itself (very common among folk Muslims), they have never thought about why God could and would display himself through Jesus Christ, one may, like Paul to the Athenians, be explaining the nature of a largely “unknown Creator God” and why it was natural for him to display his glory through Jesus Christ.

The key criterion for anyone witnessing to Muslims is in knowing both *what is* understood and *what is rejected* by their conception of God. Can they conceive of Allah revealing his glory, power, forgiveness, mercy and grace through the divine-human Jesus Christ, or have they rejected such a possibility? Can they conceive and affirm with the gospel writer that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth” and that “we have

beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son, from the Father” and that “No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known”? (John 1:14, 18, RSV)

Many Muslims crave assurance of their place in heaven. It is, therefore, crucial that every Muslim has the opportunity to understand the profound revelation of God in Jesus Christ, allowing every Muslim to either accept or reject God's gift. This will eliminate the concern posed by the initial question: “Do we serve the same God?” The proof is in the pudding: the willing acceptance of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

SBJT: What is the Islamic view of the death of Christ?

Samuel Shahid: The crucifixion and death of Christ is a fundamental point of contention between Christianity and Islam. In Qur'an chapter 4:157-158, the whole concept of crucifixion is absolutely negated:

They (the Jews) slew him not, nor crucified him but it so appeared to them, and lo! Those who disagree concerning it, are in doubt thereof, they have no knowledge thereof, save pursuit of a conjecture, they slew him not for certain, but Allah took him up to Himself.

Interestingly, when we examine the interpretations of these verses against other verses in the Qur'an and various accounts in Islamic tradition, much contradiction is revealed. The Qur'an, for instance, alludes to the death of Christ in these verses (emphasis added):

Behold! Allah said: “Jesus I will *cause you to die* and I will raise you to me” (Surah 3:55).

And I was a witness over them while I remained among them; but when

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You *did* cause me to die, You were Thyself the watcher over me (5:117). Peace be upon me, the day I was born, *the day I die* and the day I am resurrected (19:15).

Preconceived ideas that Jesus was neither crucified nor put to death have caused Muslim interpreters to twist the meaning of these verses. The simplest and best interpretation of the word *mutawaffika* is “to cause you to die.” Nevertheless, Muslim scholars have insisted that the word *mutawaffika* in the verses above means “to take you.” Thus, they claim that Jesus was merely lifted up to heaven alive in body and soul because God had “ended His term” on earth.

This Islamic explanation does not conform to the general context of these verses. In fact many Muslim exegetes closer to the historical period of the Qur’anic language understood the Arabic term *mutawaffika* to mean ‘to cause you to die.’¹ In His commentary on the Qur’an, Al-Razi, the renowned Islamic scholar of the middle-ages, alludes to seven different meanings of the word *mutawaffika*. However, each meaning he sets forth is incongruent with the next.² Consequently, researchers are left in total confusion. Besides, other earlier authorities such as Ibn ‘Abbas and Ibn Is-haq, intimated that Jesus died a natural death before He ascended to God.³

As a result of these contradictory interpretations, there is no general agreement among Muslims on the death of Christ. What has emerged in Islam is the theory of the *shabih* or “likeness.” This theory asserts that a historical crucifixion took place, but the one who was crucified was not Jesus. Muslims who advocate this view believe that the *shabih* was one of Jesus’ enemies. There is disagreement on the identity of the *shabih*, and many imagi-

nary stories are conjured up without any inquiry into their validity.⁴

In reality the theory of the “likeness” is not the invention of Islam, but was in vogue among some heretical Christian groups before and during the time of Muhammed. For example, during the second century the theory of the *shabih* was spread by the gnostic Basilides who claimed that Simon of Cyrene consented to be crucified instead of Jesus, so “God cast on him the likeness of Jesus and he was crucified.”⁵ The docetists also alleged that Jesus was not crucified at all, but it so appeared to the Jews. The word *docetic* is derived from a Greek verb that means “to appear.”

The heresy of the *shabih* has never disappeared throughout the course of church history. In the year A.D. 185 “a heretic sect of the descendant of the priests of Thebes who embraced Christianity claimed that ‘God forbids that Christ should be crucified. He was safely lifted up to heaven.’”⁶ This is exactly what the Qur’anic verse teaches. There is evidence of another hermetic gnostic group in the fourth century who taught that Jesus was not crucified but it seemed so to the spectators who crucified Him.⁷

These are but a few of the many other documents that denote that this heresy was in existence during the life of Muhammed. In A.D. 380 heresies were widespread in Arabia which caused the council of Constantinople to commission Bishop Gregory of Nyssa “to visit churches of Arabia and Jerusalem where disturbances had broken out and schism threatened.”⁸

Al-Razi applied logic to the theory of the *shabih*. Attempting to refute this heresy without incriminating himself as a notable Muslim scholar, al-Razi came up with six ambiguities. It is worthwhile for

Christians to refer to these six ambiguities and study the logic behind them. A good resource outlining al-Razi discussion can be found in Faris al-Qayrawani's book *Was Christ Really Crucified?*⁹

Why do Muslims reject the Christian affirmation of the crucifixion, given the fact that the Qur'an seems to be ambiguous with regard to the death of Jesus? Ideologically, there are at least three reasons.

First, Muslims find the Christian view of the person and work of Christ problematic. For example, if Jesus was God as the Bible affirms (but the Qur'an denies), then how could God be crucified? And when He was crucified, was the world without a God during His death? Moreover, Muslims ask, "Christians believe that Jesus is the Son of God; how would God allow his son to die on the cross? Is God a cannibal who yearns for blood?" And whose blood was shed? His Son's blood!

Second and in relation to the first reason, Muslims assert the absolute sovereignty of God. As an absolute sovereign, God has the power to forgive the sins of his slaves without any need for atonement. He can "will" whatever he wants. If He desires, God can send a righteous person to hell and a wicked person to heaven. No one can question His decrees. Thus there is no need for a redeemer like Jesus to die on the cross. Besides, Muslims ask, "How can a just God allow an innocent person to be punished for the sake of the guilty sinners?" According to Muslims, the laws of God declare that everyone is responsible for his or her own deeds.

The third objection has to do with the nature of man. Muslims in general reject the concept of the fallen nature of man which resulted from Adam's rebellious

attitude against God. Muslims believe that man is born innocent and he sins because of his weakness and not because his fallen nature.

In a number of Quranic references, Islamic commentaries, and traditions, however, there is support for the concept of the fallen nature of man. For instance, Abu Hurayra cites Muhammed who said, "Thus Adam disobeyed and his descendants disobeyed likewise. Adam forgot and ate from the tree; likewise his offspring also forgot. Adam sinned and his posterity sinned too!"

By rejecting the concept of the fallen nature of man, Muslims refuse to acknowledge their need for redemption, which is at the heart of the differences between the gospel and Islam. Muslims mistakenly believe that repentance and good deeds combined with the mercy of God are sufficient to pave the way for a Muslim to receive God's forgiveness. However, they fail to realize that God's holiness and justice must be satisfied. God, as the moral standard of the universe cannot overlook our sin; he cannot deny himself. That is why Paul affirms unambiguously that "the wages of sin is death" (Rom 6:23). Without God, in love, taking the initiative to provide a just and holy salvation for us in the death and resurrection of his Son, we have no concept of God who is truly the moral norm of the universe. Without God's initiative in redemption, rooted and grounded in the cross of Christ, we have no good news to proclaim, forgiveness of sin, and hope of eternal life. It is this message that we need to proclaim to the Muslim. God, in love, has chosen to save rebellious creatures who are made in his image, and Jesus, the eternal Son of God, by his own choice has died on the cross for our sins, to pay our debt, and to

satisfy God's own righteous requirement thus allowing us, by grace through faith, to be forgiven of our sin and stand justified before him. It is in the cross, as Paul long ago reminded us, that we boast, and even though it is foolishness to those who are perishing, to us who are being saved it is the power, wisdom, and glory of God.

ENDNOTES

¹Faris al-Qayrawani, *Was Christ Really Crucified?* (Villach, Austria: Light of Life, 1994) 59

²al-Fakhr al-Razi, *Al-Tafsir al-Khabir*, vol. 8 (Beirut, Lebanon: Dar al-Fikr, 1981) 74.

³IsKander Jadeed, *The Cross in the Gospel and the Qur'an* (Rikon, Switzerland, 1998) 6.

⁴al-Qayrawani, 26.

⁵Ibid., 27.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Elgin S. Moyer, *Who Was Who in Church History* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1962) 175.

⁹al-Qayrawani, 18-30