

Elijah Goossen

Dr. Dengler

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Yahweh vs Allah: Important distinctions between Christianity and Islam

“All religions are merely different paths to get to the same place.” This idea is often thrown around by people who are not entirely aware of what different religions teach, yet think that they are well-informed on the topic. Jesus’ command to make disciples demands an understanding of the religion of those we talk to, and an awareness of the similarities and differences between that religion and Christianity. According to a 2015 Pew Research study, Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world, estimated to match the Christian percentage of the world’s population by the year 2050. Islam also has many superficial similarities with Christianity that lead people to think that Christians and Muslims worship the same God. Because of this rapid growth, coupled with the many seeming similarities, understanding Islam’s teachings and how they differ from Christian beliefs is critical to the Christian’s task of making disciples.

In order to appreciate the differences between Christianity and Islam, one needs to understand how each religion started. Christianity began as the fulfillment of Judaism. The term *Christian* is derived from the word *Christ*, Jesus’ title that names Him as God’s Anointed One. The Jews had been waiting for God’s Messiah, the Hebrew term for Anointed One, to come and rescue them, and in the first century AD, Jesus revealed Himself to be that Messiah. Jesus was crucified by the Romans, but He was raised to life again on the third day after His death. Jesus’ followers believe that He is the Son of God and that He is alive in heaven with God right now.

Islam is often seen as the continuation of Judaism and Christianity as well. J. J. Saunders says that after a series of Christian church councils in Medieval Europe condemned various heresies,

many heretics were expelled from the Church and fled to Arabia, spreading their doctrine among the Arabs (18). According to legend, one of the Arabs, a young man named Muhammad, was identified as a future prophet by a Christian monk (Saunders 21). Muhammad grew up in Mecca, a prosperous trade city in Arabia. When Muhammad was about forty, he apparently began receiving revelations from God, which continued until he died and are recorded in the Koran (Saunders 21). He shared this revelation from the only true God, Allah, with his family and some close friends, and they converted to this new religion of submission, or *Islam*, to Allah (Saunders 21). This revelation was not kindly received by the rulers of Mecca, who were the guardians of the Kaaba, a polytheistic shrine (Saunders 21). Muhammad fled to Medina, where he gathered more followers and staged raids on Mecca's trade caravans (Saunders 22). After several clashes between the cities, Mecca submitted to Muhammad and Muhammad made it one of the most important cities in Islam (Saunders 23).

Amount the teachings that Muslims are required to believe are the belief in God, the belief in the Books sent by God, the belief in the prophets and messengers sent by God, and the belief in the Day of Judgement and in life after death (Maqsood, "What Muslims Believe"). Each of these beliefs is similar to beliefs in Christianity, but they have significant differences. The first belief, belief in God, is a foundation for both religions. Christianity teaches that the God of the Jews who appeared to Moses as Yahweh, or "I am," is the only one true God (Janosik). Yahweh is described as the Creator, all-knowing, and all-powerful, and yet He is a personal God who "is interested in our personal struggles" (Janosik). Christianity teaches that God is triune, that is He is three persons in one essence: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Jesus declared that He was God when He used the name Yahweh to refer to Himself (Janosik).

Belief in God is also the foundation of all other beliefs in Islam. According to the Koran (Islam's Holy Book), there is only one God, which in Arabic is Allah. The Koran lists more than 99

names for Allah, including the Almighty, the Merciful, the Giver of Life, and the Judge (Maqsood, “What Muslims Believe”). In contrast to Yahweh, Allah is impersonal and distant; in fact, He is never referred to as “Father” (Maqsood, “What Muslims Believe”). One of Allah’s most important attributes is His unity. There is only one God, and He does not have relationships with anyone, therefore He has no wives, sons, or daughters. To say that Allah has a son is a *shirk*, the greatest sin in Islam. (Janosik). Muslims deny that Jesus is God and that God is the Father because that would be to commit a *shirk* (Janosik).

Christianity and Islam both teach that God (Yahweh or Allah, respectively) sent His word to humans using prophets. Christianity teaches that the Bible is God’s word, written down under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1.21, *English Standard Version*). This includes the Jewish Old Testament as well as the New Testament writings. Christians accept the prophets of the Old Testament, such as Moses and David, as people through whom God revealed His word. Christianity does not teach that Jesus is a prophet; He is the divine Son of God.

Muslims believe in all the prophets of Judaism and Christianity in addition to Muhammad. The Koran, as the revelation given to Muhammad as the final prophet, is the “seal of all that gone before” (Maqsood, “What Muslims Believe”). The Koran tells Muslims to “believe in God, and in the revelation granted to us, and...in all that was given to Moses, Jesus and all the other Messengers from the Lord. We make no distinction between them. To God alone we surrender” (Surah 3.84, qtd. in Maqsood, “What Muslims Believe”). Muslims are therefore supposed to believe in the Bible in addition to the Koran. Muslims do not believe that Jesus is God. As stated above, this would be a *shirk*. Islam teaches that Jesus was one of the greatest of the prophets, was born of a virgin, and worked miracles, but was only human and not divine (Maqsood, “What Muslims Believe”).

Another important difference between Christianity and Islam is the belief about what happens to a person after they die. Christians believe that God demands perfection, and without

perfection, a person will not enter the kingdom of God (Matthew 5.20). Because everyone has sinned, everyone is already condemned and will not see life (Romans 5.12,18, John 3.18). However, Jesus' death on the cross made reconciliation with God possible, and whoever believes in Jesus will have God's gift of eternal life (Romans 5.8-11, John 3.36). This salvation is by faith alone, and no amount of works can earn a person's way to eternal life (Ephesians 2.8-9). Eternal life is assured and will last forever; "no one will snatch them out of my hand" (John 10.28).

Islam, on the other hand, teaches that a person's works are recorded through his life and that they will be judged by Allah (Maqsood, "What Muslims Believe"). This judgment will be absolutely fair (Maqsood, "What Muslims Believe"). The person's deeds will be weighed; if one's good deeds outweigh his or her bad deeds, then he or she will go to heaven (Surah 101.7-10). Because only Allah knows a person's destiny, they will not know until they are judged whether Allah wills them to go to heaven or not. Even after this judgment, there is still uncertainty. The Koran teaches that "those who are wretched shall be in the Fire...They will dwell there for all the time that the heavens and earth endure, *unless your Lord wills otherwise*...And those who are blessed shall be in the Garden, where they will dwell for all the time that the heavens and the earth endure, *unless your Lord wills otherwise* – a gift unceasing" (Surah 11.106-108, qtd. in Maqsood, "What Muslims Believe"). This passage could mean that heaven and hell are not eternal states; Allah can change His mind.

Both Christianity and Islam have guidelines for their followers to follow to please God. Muslims live in submission to Allah by following the five pillars of Islam: bearing witness, praying, purifying their wealth, fasting, and making the pilgrimage to Mecca (Maqsood, "What Muslims do"). Bearing witness involves reciting the *shahadah* or creed: "I bear witness that there is no God but the Almighty (Al-Lah); and I bear witness that Muhammad is the Prophet of Allah" (Maqsood, "What Muslims do"). The shahadah is very important in Muslim life; it is the first thing that infants hear

and the last words that Muslims hope to say. The shahadah is the foundation for Muslim belief and practice.

Christianity has several creeds that help Christians remember and teach what they believe. The Apostle's Creed is probably the most widespread creed in Christian belief. C. E. B. Cranfield states that the creed is a "concise but comprehensive summary of New Testament teaching" and an "invaluable aid toward a reasonably clear understanding of the Christian faith" (6). While this creed and others like it are very important in the Christian faith, Christians are not required to say them every day, nor are they on the same level as scripture. The creeds function to help Christians understand their beliefs well.

The next pillar of Islam is prayer. Prayer is common in both Islam and Christianity, but it is practiced differently in both religions. Maqsood says that Muslims must pray at five specific times each day. These ceremonial prayers must be preceded by a ceremonial washing. Muslims pray facing Mecca and the prayers are led by a volunteer called an *Imam*. The prayers follow specific rituals in position and phrasing, and Muslims are encouraged to go the Mosque to pray in community. In addition to these required prayers, Muslims pray throughout the day. There is no intermediary between the Muslim and Allah; each person approaches Allah on a "one-to-one basis" ("What Muslims do")

Christian prayer is not ceremonial or ritualistic. Often, prayer is considered to be individualistic, but congregational prayers are used during worship services. The Bible commands Christians to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5.17). Christians can pray anywhere at any time, and there is no specific direction to face while praying. Christians are not alone with the Father when they pray; the Holy Spirit intercedes between the Christian and the Father with "groanings too deep for words" expressing what Christians do not know how to express (Romans 8.26). Prayer is

important in the life of the Christian because it is the avenue of communication between God and humans.

The third pillar is the paying of the religious tax, the *zakah*. Muslims must pay 2.5% of their surplus money each year, keeping enough for the family to live on. Paying this tax demonstrates that the Muslim is not attached to money but recognizes that all wealth belongs to God. (Maqsood, “What Muslims do”). Maqsood states that hoarding wealth is selfish and uncaring toward others who have need of the money. The paying of the *zakah* helps keep money in circulation and distributes it to those who are in need (“What Muslims do”).

The Muslim practice of paying *zakah* is very similar to the Christian concept of tithing. Traditionally, a tithe has amounted to 10% of a person’s income, and this practice was instituted in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Israel was supposed to give God the first fruits of their produce and then live on the rest. Christian giving is an act of thanksgiving to God for what He has blessed His people with. God does not care about the actual amount given as much as the attitude in which it is given. Samuel tells Saul that “to obey is better than sacrifice” (1 Samuel 15.22) and Jesus says that the poor widow who gave two copper coins gave more than all the rich who gave out of there wealth because she gave “all she had to live on” (Luke 21.1). Ananias and Sapphira demonstrate that God cares more about the attitude of the giver than the gift itself. Peter states that the money was theirs to do with what they pleased, but because they lied to the Holy Spirit, they were punished and died (Acts 5.1-11).

Fasting is another practice that is similar to Christianity and Islam. Muslims fast from food, drink, and pleasure during the month of Ramadan. Maqsood describes the zeal that some Muslims have to keep this fast: some will not brush their teeth or shower to avoid accidentally swallowing some water, others will not take medicines, even if they are sick. (“What Muslims do”). The fasting

is broken at night when eating and drinking is permissible, and at the end of the month, Muslims celebrate by eating the “Feast of Breakfast,” *Eid ul-Fitr* (Maqsood, “What Muslims do”).

Christianity also has a traditional month-long fast before Easter known as Lent. Christians will often give up things of pleasure in order to focus themselves on Christ during the Easter season. Fasting is not required during this season, but throughout Acts, it is often mentioned in connection with prayer for guidance and worship. As with tithing, God is concerned with the attitude of the believer while he or she is fasting. Jesus said that “when you fast do not look gloomy like the hypocrites...anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret” (Matthew 6.16-18). Fasting is between the Christian and God and should not be a public matter.

The last pillar of Islam is the *Hajj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca. Every Muslim who is able to afford it must make the Hajj at least once during their lifetime (Maqsood, “What Muslims do”). During the Hajj, Muslims dress simply and are completely separated to God. They follow carefully defined rituals throughout the entire pilgrimage, including walking around the Kaaba, visiting Mt. Arafat, and stoning obelisks that represent Satan (Maqsood, “What Muslims do”). If the Muslim fails to follow all the rituals, their Hajj does not count.

There is no equivalent to the Hajj in Christian belief, although many Christians do travel to the Holy Land to visit the land in which Jesus lived. These trips are often more informative and meant to help the Christian understand the Bible in the cultural context better. There is no required pilgrimage, and there are no specific rituals or times associated with a pilgrimage. Traveling to the land of Israel will not improve a Christian’s standing with God, although it may help the Christian understand the Bible in a different light.

Islam and Christian are often seen as similar religions, and although they have similar beliefs and practices, they also have important differences in those beliefs and practices. In order to

effectively talk with a Muslim about Jesus, it is vital to understand the comprehensive nature of Islam and the emphasis on community that many of the practices encourage. Showing love to Muslims by taking the time to learn about Islam and being willing and able to discuss religion is integral in building a relationship with a Muslim to lead them to Jesus. Only when someone shows that they care about others will others listen to what they have to say.

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