

Christianity and Islam

Christianity and Islam:

Incompatible Views on God, Christ, and Scripture

By

John J. Johnson

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CHAPTER 1

THE LOPSIDED NATURE OF THE CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM DIALOGUE

In 2016, Larycia Hawkins, a tenured theology professor at Wheaton University, ignited campus-wide controversy at the evangelical school because she claimed that Christians and Muslims worship the same God. “I stand in religious solidarity with Muslims because they, like me, a Christian, are people of the book,” Hawkins wrote in response. “And as Pope Francis stated last week, we worship the same God.”¹ Her solidarity with believers of different faiths was not the problem; inter-faith dialogue between adherents of different faiths has been happening for decades. It was her claim that the God of Islam and of Christianity is the same deity that caused her trouble at the theologically conservative Wheaton. And yet, why were her words controversial? Are not both religions monotheistic? Do they not both trace their origins to the Jewish patriarch Abraham? Do they not both believe in revealed scripture, heaven, hell, and the reality of angels and Satan?

But Hawkins is not the only Christian to make such statements. Hans Kung, one of the greatest Roman Catholic thinkers of the 20th century, wrote: “[a]s a Christian I can be sure that, as long as I have chosen this Jesus as the Christ for my life and death, I have also chosen his follower Muhammad, inasmuch as he appeared to the one and same God and to

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/16/magazine/the-professor-wore-a-hijab-in-solidarity-then-lost-her-job.html>. A statement from the Second Vatican Council states, “But the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, in the first place among whom are the Muslims: these profess to hold the faith of Abraham, and together with us they adore the one, merciful God, mankind’s judge on the last day.” <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/ecumenical-and-inter-religious/interreligious/islam/vatican-council-and-papal-statements-on-islam.cfm>). Of course, this Council was convened in the early 1960s, and was a radical departure from what the Roman Catholic Church had taught about Islam during the previous centuries.

Jesus.”² Or again. Kung writes, “[a]s a Christian I can be sure that, as long as I have chosen this Jesus as the Christ for my life and death, I have also chosen his follower Muhammad, inasmuch as he appealed to the one and same God and to Jesus.”³ As we will see later, the Jesus of the New Testament is not the Jesus of the Koran, so any appeal like this will necessarily prove contradictory. Yale Theologian Miroslav Volf takes much the same conciliatory position toward Islam, and actually makes this startling claim. “What the Qur’an denies about God as the Holy Trinity has been denied by every great teacher of the church in the past and ought to be denied by every orthodox Christian today.”⁴ Why a brilliant Yale theologian would make such an obviously inaccurate statement is puzzling to put it mildly, and will be examined in more depth later in this book.

Oddly enough, statements like this are rarely, if ever, made by leading Muslim theologians. It is almost as if they know there is a theological line they dare not cross. Yet in the West, many Christian thinkers seem to go out of their way to play down, if not deny, the contradictory teachings of the two faiths. Perhaps it has to do with religious ecumenism, so highly-prized in the West. Or perhaps it is a result of the uncertainty in its own traditions and religious beliefs that prompts the West to seek religious harmony. “Christian scholars seem slow to appreciate the rigidity of the theological constraints upon their Muslim counterparts.”⁵ In any case, Muslim theologians have not responded in kind. In 2007, a group of Muslim scholars issued an olive branch of sorts to Christians. The document, entitled “A Common Word Between Us and You,” affirms such generic points as “love of God and love of neighbour,” but the Muslim scholars who penned the document present “a clear admonition against belief in the Sonship of Christ and the Trinity.” When they refer to Christ, they refer to Jesus as he is presented in the Koran, not in the Bible (more of this in subsequent chapters), and the Koranic Jesus is “neither Lord, God, nor Saviour.”⁶ In a paper written as a stern rebuke to Kung’s “higher critical” approach to the Qur’anic picture of Christ, Muslim scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr writes “[i]f certain verses of the Qur’an are rejected by means of any intrinsic argument or reason such as making friends with Christians, or achieving world peace or getting into the United Nations, or for any other worldly reason though it be laudable in

² Hans Kung, “Christianity and World Religions: The Dialogue with Islam as One Model,” *Muslim World* 77, no. 2 (April 1987): 95.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Miroslav Volf, *Allah: A Christian Response* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 14.

⁵ Fred Farrokh, “The ‘Same God Question’: Why Muslims are Not Moving Toward Christians,” *Themelios* 41, no. 3 (2016): 465.

⁶ Ibid., 466-467.

itself, then the rest of the Qur'an must also be rejected as the Word of God."⁷ Again, Muslims will go only so far in the Christian-Muslim dialogue. They will not sacrifice the essentials of their faith, and why should they? Even as early as 1968, before it was fashionable to engage in interreligious dialogue, a seminal paper on the Christian-Muslim encounter by Isma'il Ragi al-Faruqi stated that the Christian and the Muslim both claim to know the truth about God. "Neither Islam nor Christianity can or will ever give it up. Certainly this is exclusivism; but *the* truth is exclusive."⁸ His point is that both sides should be open to at least listening to the other, although the "rules" he lays out for the dialogue clearly favour the Islamic side.⁹ For instance, he labels the following as outdated theological themes that should not be part of honest Christian-Muslim dialogue: humans are not inherently sinful; the doctrine "of original sin, of the fallenness of man, appears from the perspective of contemporary ethical reality to have outlived its meaningfulness;"¹⁰ and the notion of Christian justification "¹¹ does not accord with contemporary reality." Of course, if all these doctrines are ruled out a priori, there will be precious little to talk to the Christian interlocutor about!

Although I write as a Christian, this book is not intended as a critique of Islam. In fact, there is much that I admire about Islam. I am deeply impressed by the Haj, the annual pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia which now, thanks to the ease of modern air travel, draws about two million devotees each year. My own religion, Christianity, has nothing like this ten-day-long display of unity among believers from all the nations of the world. I am equally impressed by the Muslim practice of praying five times per day. How many Christians find it onerous to attend church services even once a week! I have deep respect for the fact that most Muslim countries have not fallen prey to the moral relativism that is now pervading (some would say ruining) the Western world. In Islamic countries, the lines between what is morally right and wrong are still fairly clear, even if this demarcation does sometimes run the risk of devolving into fanaticism, as pointed out most vividly in the atrocities committed by al-Qaeda, and ISIS. I have personally taught several Muslim students, and I have frequented Muslim-owned businesses, and my impression of Muslims

⁷ Seyyid Hossein Nasr, "Response to Hans Kung's Paper on Christian-Muslim Dialogue," *Muslim World* 77, no. 2 (April 1987): 100.

⁸ Isma'il Ragi al-Faruqi, "Islam and Christianity: Diatribe or Dialogue," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 5 (1968): 52.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 45-46.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 66.

is that they are far removed from the stereotype often perpetuated in the media. Even Martin Luther, himself no lover of Islam (and with good reason, as Islam was a palpable military threat to Europe in his day) could write that the Turks should be grudgingly congratulated for performing more good works in their daily lives than did the Christians of Europe.¹²

But while I respect Islam, I see nothing wrong with pointing out the differences between Islam and Christianity. After all, if no differences existed, there would be no need for two religions. Jacob Neusner, one of Judaism's greatest scholars, has said of Jesus: "Judaism does not reflect on the meaning of Jesus, who enjoys no standing whatsoever in the theology of Judaism or its law."¹³ That Christianity and Judaism are different religions is taken for granted. Jews do not view Christ as divine, while Christians do. Jews do not view the New Testament as scripture, while Christians do. Theological disagreement does not necessarily lead to hatred and violence (although it sadly did and can, as with the above-mentioned Islamic terrorism, or the terrible persecution of Jews at the hands of the Church during the Middle Ages). Yet past violence should not rule out an honest discussion of religious differences. Hans Kung has written a seven-hundred-page tome on Islam. These words appear on the back cover of the book. "The options have become clear: rivalry amongst the religions, a clash of civilizations, war between nations, or a dialogue of civilizations and peace between the religions as a harbinger of peace among nations. Faced with a deathly threat to all humankind, shouldn't we demolish the walls of prejudice stone by stone and build bridges of dialogue, including bridges to Islam, rather than erect new barriers of hatred, belligerence, and hostility?"¹⁴ Kung is, of course, correct that better understanding between religions can possibly reduce violence and hatred. But there are a few problems with Kung's rationale. First, the violence in religion is not coming from those who read learned tomes on theology. And the problem with interreligious dialogue is that, sooner or later, an impasse is reached, and the two sides can go no farther. Of course, some thinkers reach the impasse and try to go around it as best they can. Thus, Christian theologian Martin Bauschke: "Christians and Muslims are agreed that however Jesus may have died and whatever happened to him after his death—this death did not and does not have the last word about his life and activity on behalf of God.

¹² Quoted in Volf, *Allah: A Christian Response*, 67.

¹³ Jacob Neusner, "Why Jesus has No Meaning to Judaism," in *Jesus in the World's Faiths: Leading Thinkers from Five Religions Reflect on His Meaning*, ed. Gregory A. Barker (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005), 166.

¹⁴ Hans Kung, *Islam: Past, Present and Future*, trans. by John Bowden (Oxford, UK: Oneworld, 2007), back cover.

Rather, this death was the way through, the transition, the way back into the presence and nearness of the one who sent him.”¹⁵ It seems to me that there are several things worth noting here. First, who are the Christian theologians who “agree” that Christ’s manner of death and his fate after death can be left up in the air in such a cavalier manner? The author would have us agree that *all* Christian thinkers believe this. Second, note that this quotation is far more amenable to a Muslim than it is to a Christian. The Muslim, for whom Christ is far less important, can live with the ambiguity inherent in Bauschke’s words. My book is based on a more fair-minded approach that does not diminish either religion, but respects the difference of each. Timothy George has written that “neither the uniqueness of the Christian gospel nor the distinctiveness of the Muslim faith should be forfeited in the interest of interreligious dialogue.... The call to conversion is inherent in both Christianity and Islam.”¹⁶ Christian trinitarianism, for example, has long been a subject of critique by those who claim to believe in “pure” monotheism, rather than the New Testament version of plurality within unity that characterizes the Christian understanding of God.¹⁷

My goal in this book is not to “prove” one religion right and the other wrong. Rather, I wish to honestly assess both religions, and not on minor points of disagreement, but on essential ones. It makes little difference, for instance, that Muslims formally worship on Fridays, while Christians attend church on Sundays. But on the questions that really define the two religions, they disagree, even contradict each other. In chapter two, I begin with the nature of God as understood by both faiths. Since they both conceive of God in radically different terms, it is essential to understand these differences, since all other matters of doctrine will flow from these two contradictory views of the divine being. Does God enter into covenants with humanity? What is God’s attitude toward the Jews, the forefathers of both Christianity and Islam? This is especially important, since the God of the Jews is claimed by both Christianity and Islam. If the New Testament and the Koran portray this Jewish God in radically different terms, this raises serious problems.

¹⁵ Quoted in Kung, *Islam: Past, Present and Future*, 499.

¹⁶ Timothy George, *Is the Father of Jesus the God of Muhammad?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 93.

¹⁷ Imad N. Shehadeh, “The Predicament of Islamic Monotheism,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 161 (April-June 2004): 144. The “non-trinitarian” groups that Shehadeh lists as unreluctant to critique the Christian Trinity are “Judaism, Unitarianism, Mormonism, Oneness Pentecostalism, Jehovah’s Witnesses, offshoots of Adventism (Armstrongism), the Unification Church, and especially Islam.” These are scholarly critiques though, not personal ones, and it is doubtful that most of these critics of Christianity harbor personal hatred for those Christians who hold to a trinitarian understanding of God.

Can God be described as loving? Does he choose his followers for salvation, or do they choose Him? These are essential questions, and we will find that the Bible and the Koran, Christianity and Islam, disagree on all of them. Chapter three addresses the question of monotheism. Is God pure oneness as in Islam, or is God the trinitarian God of Christianity? Unadulterated oneness, or three-in-oneness? In Chapter four I address the biblical and koranic understandings of humanity. What are the Christian and Muslim understanding of sin, and what are the remedies for it? Again, we will get two very different answers from the two faiths. Chapter five is dedicated to the death and resurrection of Christ. These events are at the very heart of the Christian faith. Yet Islam denies the crucifixion occurred, much less the resurrection. Why is the crucifixion of central importance to one faith, but of no importance at all to the other? Although I do not intend to engage in Christian apologetics in this book, I will be somewhat critical of the Muslim denial of Christ's crucifixion. But this is only because there is extra-biblical evidence supporting the veracity of the event, while Islam's denial of it has no extra-koranic support. Still, even though I will be critical of the Muslim position, I will try to explain why the denial of Christ's death on the cross makes sense from the Muslim viewpoint; I will attempt to present the Islamic position fairly. Chapter six is concerned with the scriptures of the Christian and Muslim communities. Are the Bible and the Koran reliable? Are they the words of God, or the words of men, or a combination of both? Must a believer take every word of scripture literally, or is there room for a more moderate approach to the Bible and the Koran?

Ultimately, there are five possible answers to the question, do Christians and Muslims worship the same God? One, of course, is yes, they do. The second option considers the question pointless, since there is no divine being (atheism). The third option is that the God of Christianity is true and that divine being of Islam is false, or vice versa. The fourth option is that both Christians and Muslims are describing the same God, but doing so in very different ways. Consider an analogy. My friend and I both know a man named Smith. I describe him as kind, loving, devout, generous, and devoted to the well-being of all humanity. But my friend sees Smith in an entirely different light. He considers Smith to be dishonest, cruel, violent, racist, and misanthropic. We may be trying to describe the same Smith, but our descriptions differ to such a radical extent that, for all practical purposes, we may as well be talking about two different Smiths. The fifth option is that the one God has intentionally revealed himself in contradictory ways to Christians and to Muslims. If this is the case, such a God cannot be trusted, for Christians and Muslims, if they agree on anything, concur that God is the embodiment of truth. A Cosmic Deceiver-God is of interest to neither

party. The old analogy of the elephant and the blind men comes to mind. Many who subscribe to religious pluralism, the idea that all religions teach basically the same truth, are fond of this parable. In it, several blind men use their hands to feel an elephant's body. Each man only feels one part of the animal, and describes the way that part of the beast feels accurately. This, pluralists believe, is how humans are in relationship to the divine. We each grasp a part of it, but we are blind to the larger picture (or elephant, in this case). But this analogy will not work for Christianity and Islam, for two reasons. In the analogy, humans are grasping blindly for God, but in Christianity and Islam, humanity is not grasping, it is *receiving* God's truth in the form of divine revelation. Also, both religions claim that God has revealed the full picture, so to speak. This does not mean that any Christian or Muslim makes the arrogant claim to have an exhaustive knowledge of God. But they do claim that enough has been revealed about the important issues like the nature of God, humanity, and the means to obtaining life eternal.

For the most part, I will take the Christian and Islamic scriptures at face value, steering clear of critical views. This is because Christian and Muslim orthodoxies were created in the period before the advent of biblical criticism in the 1800s. And, the type of rigorous, often sceptical critiques to which the Bible has been subject are pretty much of a rarity among Islamic scholars, either out of personal piety, fear of persecution, or both. Not only that, but the nature of the Islamic revelation is different from the Christian one. Whereas the Church has always taught that men, under divine inspiration, wrote the Bible, the Koran is a divine creation, which most Muslims believe existed with Allah before it was given to Muhammad. "The Qur'an is seen as literal revelation, explicitly communicated in the Arabic language by celestial meditation to the Prophet who is ensured protection from even slips of the tongue. The Scripture, therefore, is divine, immune from verbal error and—all the more—from necessities in of scholarship in its reception."¹⁸ Thus, the concept of a scholar being a "moderate" or a "liberal" in her approach to the Koran is found far less often than in Christianity. One moderate scholar of Islam, Farid Esack, admits that while he considers himself a Muslim thinker who is open to critical ideas concerning religion, most Muslims, be they laypersons or scholars, hold the traditional view that the Koran is in full a divinely authored text.¹⁹ However,

¹⁸ Kenneth Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1985), 8. Cragg is held to be one of the pioneers in the Christian-Muslim dialogue, who began writing on the topic in the 1960s.

¹⁹ Farid Esack, *The Qur'an: A Short Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Oneworld Publications, 2002), 1-6.

in the last chapter on the Bible and the Koran, I will have to employ a bit of what used to be called “higher criticism” in order to point out some of the problems with the traditional fundamentalist approaches to the Bible and the Koran.

Who is this Book for?

I believe this book is for anyone interested in learning more about the differences between the world’s two largest religions. I have attempted to write in a way that will prove interesting to scholars, but at the same time remain relevant to non-specialists. In fact, I am probably more interested in the non-theologically trained Christian and Muslim. They make up the bulk of both faiths, and it is they who find themselves in an ever-shrinking world, where understanding what the other “side” believes about matters of ultimate concern is of the utmost importance. Confusion about the faith of the “other” can only be increased when noted scholar of religion Karen Armstrong writes this regrading Islam’s relationship to other world faiths: “today Muslim scholars argue that had Muhammad known about the Buddhists or the Hindus, the Australian Aborigines or the Native Americans, the Quran would have endorsed their sages too, because all rightly guided religion that submitted wholly to God, refused to worship man-made deities and preached that justice and equality came from the same divine source.”²⁰ Armstrong does not cite any of the scholars that she believes hold this position, but it seems unlikely that Muhammad would have found the widespread use of idols in Hinduism acceptable. And what would he make of Buddha’s claim that God’s existence was uncertain, and indeed unnecessary for the system of self-enlightenment that the Buddha was teaching? Non-Islamic revelations “all erred more or less from the truth because none has preserved the text of its original revelation.”²¹ In fact, the period before Allah gave the koranic revelation to Muhammad is often

²⁰ Karen Armstrong, *Islam: A Short History* (New York: Modern Library, 2002), 9-10. In Islam, only monotheists, mainly Jews and Christians, are given the title “People of the Book,” in recognition that they worship the same God as do Muslims. When the Islamic conquests engulfed the Middle East and North Africa in the decades following Muhammad’s death, polytheists were faced with the hard choice of conversion to Islam or death, while Jews and Christians were basically permitted to continue practicing their faith, as long as they submitted to Muslim control and, especially taxation. Failure to do so would lead to violence on the Muslim side. See John L. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 35.

²¹ Isma’il Raji al-Faruqi *Islam* (Niles, IL: Argus Communications, 1984): 10.

referred to as *jahiliyyah*, or the “time of ignorance.” It is probably this idea that led to the recent destruction of priceless religious artifacts from Iraq’s pre-Islamic past at the hands of ISIS, and the destruction of giant-sized Buddhas in Afghanistan by the Islamic terrorists in that country.

Names for the Divine

The Arabic word for God is Allah (literally, “the God”). Arabic-speaking Christians use the word just as English-speaking Christians use the word “God.” For the sake of clarity, I will use “God” when speaking of the divine being in Christianity, and “Allah” when referring to the deity of Islam. I will also retain the traditional practice, in both religions, of referring to the deity with male pronouns. This is not because I believe that the Supreme Being is “male.” Rather, I do it out of respect for the traditional ways of speaking about the divine in both faiths. Use of traditional terms for God also allows one to avoid such clumsy terms as “Godself.”

Theology

When comparing theological positions, I am only interested in the orthodox positions of the two religions. All orthodox Christian denominations agree that God is a trinity, for example. My focus will be on what C. S. Lewis termed “mere Christianity,” or what is foundational to most Christian belief down through the ages. Similarly, all orthodox Muslims believe in the shahada, the Muslim statement of faith, that there is only one God and that Muhammad is His prophet. “Mere” Islam is best represented by Sunni Islam, which comprises eighty percent of the world’s Muslims. So, semi-Christian groups like the Mormons or the Jehovah’s Witness will not be the focus of this study, just as, for example, the black nationalist Nation of Islam will not be considered when discussing traditional Islamic positions. When discussing Islamic theology, I have tried to use Muslim scholars as much as possible, rather than peppering the text with quotations from the Koran. My position is that Muslims are far more qualified than I am to interpret their own scriptures. A word needs to be said about the Hadith literature in Islam. The Hadith is a collection of sayings about Muhammad, or utterances by him. The Hadith is especially important for Islamic jurisprudence. However, there is debate within the Muslim community regarding which Hadith collections are the most authentic, and which possess less historical

reliability.²² Because of the technical nature of the hadith literature, I will limit myself primarily to what is found in the pages of the Koran.

All Bible quotations will be taken from the NIV translation. All quotations from the Koran will be from the Penguin Classics translation by N. J. Dawood.²³

²² Thomas W. Lippman, *Understanding Islam: An Introduction to the Muslim World* (New York: Penguin, 1985), 4-5, 79-80.

²³ *The Koran*, trans. N. J. Dawood (London: Penguin Books, 1988).

CHAPTER 2

THE ATTITUDE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT AND THE KORAN TOWARD JUDAISM

Christianity and Islam are often called Abrahamic, or Western (to differentiate them from Eastern faiths like Hinduism and Buddhism) religions. Both religions believe they worship the God revealed in the Hebrew Bible, sometimes referred to by Christians as the Old Testament. Christ, of course, was a Jew, as were all his earliest followers. Those followers saw Jesus as the fulfilment of the messianic prophecies of the Hebrew scriptures. The Koran is full of characters (Adam, Moses, Joseph) from the Old Testament, although their stories often differ significantly from those found in the Jewish Bible. Still, the Koran makes clear that the God of Muhammad was at work hundreds of years earlier as He revealed Himself to the Jewish people.

Now, the objective truth of, say, Hinduism could be true, even though it developed quite independently of Judaism. But, for our purposes, both Christianity and Islam claim they are continuing the monotheistic tradition of the Jews. If this is true, then how do Christianity and Islam treat that Jewish tradition? In Islam, Muhammad was the last, and the greatest of the biblical prophets. He follows in the prophetic footsteps of the Hebrew prophets, as well as the path of Jesus, teaching the same things they did, for it is a cornerstone of Muslim faith that God's message to humanity has always been the same. Thus, Muhammad shares the prophetic, if not the genetic, lineage of the Jewish prophets. This may be true in terms of *tawhid* (the Arabic word for monotheism), but it is certainly not true in many other important areas. One area is the unique, ongoing chosen status of the Jews, revealed in the covenants God has made with them. The Koran's teachings are at odds with the teaching of the OT prophets regarding God's revelation to the Jews. Therefore, Islam's claim that Muhammad stands in the same prophetic tradition as the Jewish prophets is problematic, though, obviously not automatically invalid. Still, considering the following, "Once when Muhammad entered a Jewish school to try to convert them, the Jews there insulted him by asking, 'What is your religion, Muhammad?' When he

replied, ‘The religion of Abraham,’ they mocked him ‘But Abraham was a Jew.’”²⁴

The question arises, did God reveal Himself in ways that contradict His earlier revelations to Israel?

Christianity also deviates from orthodox Jewish monotheism, namely because of its trinitarian doctrine. And there certainly is criticism of Judaism in the pages of the NT. For all the critiques of Jews and Judaism in the NT, though, Christianity is eager to portray itself as the heir to Judaism, in a way that Islam is and does not. Jesus takes the side of his Jewish brethren against that of the ethnically mixed and theologically dubious Samaritans in this passage from the Gospel of John, “You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we [Jews] worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews.” (John, 4:22).

In fact, Christianity cannot even exist with its older sibling Judaism, and this, no doubt, has caused much of the anti-Semitism on the part of Christians over the centuries. Christians know they are beholden to a faith that denies the central tenet of Christianity, namely the divinity of Christ.

Did God Send Monotheistic Prophets to All Peoples of the Earth?

One aspect of Islam that may at first seem to connect Islam with Judaism is the idea that monotheism is the original religion of mankind. Fair enough, the OT seems to teach this as well, especially if one holds to a literal interpretation of the Adam and Eve story in Genesis.²⁵ Adam and Eve, Noah, and others who lived before Abraham knew the one God, but according to the Bible, it is with Abraham that God enters into a covenantal relationship with humanity that will eventually grow into Judaism. This is axiomatic among the three monotheistic religions, and thus they are categorized as the Abrahamic religions. But the Hebrew scriptures do not teach that God sent prophets to all the peoples of the earth (as does the

²⁴ Quoted in P. L. Rose, “Muhammad, the Jews and the Constitution of Medina: Retrieving the Historical Kernel,” *Der Islam* 86, no. 1 (2009): 13. The scene is the Arabian town of Medina. The dubious Jews are mocking Muhammad’s claim to be a prophet like those found in the Jewish scriptures.

²⁵ Since the nineteenth century, many Jews and Christians have found themselves unable to take literally the creation account in the early chapters of Genesis, mainly because of advances in the fields of anthropology and geology. Much has been written on the subject, but for our purposes it is enough to note that both the Hebrew Bible and the Islamic Koran indicate Adam and Eve were the first humans on earth, and that they knew the one God.

Koran) but rather that the pre-Abrahamic believers (like Noah) were, in a sense, laying the theological foundation for what would eventually become an exclusively Jewish covenant between God and His people.

Yet Islam claims that once the truth of monotheism was lost by Adam and Eve's descendants, Allah sent messengers to *all* peoples of the earth to remind them, or bring them back to the truth of monotheism (Koran 16:36). In fact, Muhammad is often portrayed in Islam not as a prophet with a new message, but as one who reminds wayward humanity to return to what it once knew to be true, namely monotheism. "The Koran says that there is no people to whom a prophet has not been sent...and Hadith literature [the Hadith literature is a collection of stories about Muhammad, as well as saying attributed to Muhammad] puts the number, symbolically, at one hundred and twenty four thousand."²⁶ Now, there is no historical record of monotheistic prophets being sent to, say, the ancient Chinese or the ancient inhabitants of India. But even if there were, this would only reinforce the Islamic idea that Jews do not have a monopoly on revelation. In Judaism God reveals himself (after the prehistorical material in Genesis chapters 1-11) only to Jews. In Islam, the Jews do not occupy the special status as God's chosen recipients of divine revelation. This is just one of many instances of the Koran diminishing the importance of the Jews in salvation history—other examples will be given below. So here we have the first of many contradictions that must be addressed regarding the God/Allah distinction. Was God primarily interested in revealing himself in an exclusive way to the Jewish people, or were the Jews but one of many ancient peoples who were recipients of divine revelation? This is no peripheral issue. The covenant between the Jews and their God is the central theme of the Hebrew scriptures. And it is a theme that is picked up and reimagined by Christian writers in the New Testament.

There are enigmatic references in the Koran to the *hanifs*. These monotheists have been described as "purely Arabian monotheists."²⁷ Purely Arabian they may have been, but history knows of no prophet who was sent to them. The best explanation is that these monotheists were influenced by either Judaism or Christianity, since they lived in Arabia, the land that saw innumerable caravans coming through, bringing new goods, ideas, and religious beliefs. Even the Koran, in 3:95, acknowledges that "they were

²⁶ Cyril Glasse, *The New Encyclopedia of Islam* (Walnut Creek, CA: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 365.

²⁷ Christopher M. Moreman, *Beyond the Threshold: Afterlife Beliefs and Experiences in World Religions* (Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield, 2008), 69.

descendants of Abraham and his son Ismail.”²⁸ Similarly, a group called the *Sabians* are mentioned three times in the Koran, but “it is not known with certainty who the Sabians of the Koran really were or are.”²⁹ But, since the Koran mentions them along with Jews and Christians, it seems safe to assume they had absorbed biblical monotheism, for they are not associated in the Koran with any special, non-Jewish prophet.

Why is it only ancient *Jewish* monotheism that outlasted all of the other ancient monotheisms? Why is it that only Jewish monotheism gave birth to Christianity and Islam, the monotheistic faiths that dominate the world’s religious landscape? If the Biblical God did indeed reveal himself to other primitive cultures, it was nothing like what the Jews experienced as his special, covenant people. Such is the unique, and utterly unlikeliness of Jewish survival that the great twentieth-century Protestant scholar Karl Barth thought the continuing existence of the Jews a sure proof of God’s existence. Barth is fond of quoting a conversation between Frederick the Great and Frederick’s personal physician, Zimmermann: “Zimmermann, can you name me a single proof of the existence of God?” And Zimmermann replied, ‘Your majesty, the Jews!’”³⁰ Of course, a Muslim could make a similar reply. How is it that a rag-tag group of Arab Bedouin, who once were pagans, converted to the monotheism of Muhammad and, in just a few decades after his death, had conquered much of the Middle East and North Africa? To Barth, religions grew from nothing and prospered, but they did so in spite of their very different understandings of God and his relationship to them. To the Jewish or Muslim believer, their survival and success seems providential. To the secular-minded, it is a lucky occurrence of history. But that both groups would prosper if the same God was behind each seems somewhat contradictory. Are both groups chosen by God, despite the fact that neither acknowledges the chosen status of the other?

So, we have here a lack of recognition on the Koran’s part of the importance of Jewish monotheism. In fact, it could be claimed that the Koran “de-Judaizes” God as much as possible. Nothing like Christ’s above-referenced words, “salvation is of the Jews” is found in the Koran, because for Islam, the Jews are just one of many ancient peoples who have been in communion with God. The Koran does mention God’s Mosaic covenant with the Jews, but “the entire Qur’an makes no mention of God’s unconditional covenants with Israel, namely, the Abrahamic Covenant [mentioned at

²⁸ John L. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 5.

²⁹ Glasse, *The New Encyclopedia of Islam*, 390.

³⁰ Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, ed. and trans. G. T. Thompson (London: SCM, 1949), 75.

various points in Genesis], the Davidic Covenant (2 Sam. 7:4-17) and the New Covenant (Jer. 31:31-34).”³¹

The Koran’s take on the near-sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham is told differently in the Koran than in the Old Testament. In the Koran, it is never clearly stated which son, Isaac or the originator of the Arab race, Ishmael, is almost sacrificed. However, most Islamic commentators understand that Ishmael is the one who was almost sacrificed, and thus the divine blessing flows through him, rather than Isaac. The location of the almost-sacrifice in Islamic understanding is outside the Muslim holy city of Mecca.³² The OT version is recounted in Genesis 22:1-19, and takes place somewhere in Mesopotamia, but certainly not in what is now Saudi Arabia. In Islam, it is Ishmael who, as the traditional forefather of the Arabs, paves the way for the final and greatest revelation—that given to Muhammad and enshrined in the Koran. In a sense, Judaism is only important in that it produced Ishmael, the forefather of the Arabs, the people who would receive God’s last and superior revelation. This is problematic, for it is a generally accepted scholarly position that the older version of a story is probably the most accurate version, and no matter when Abraham’s story was written down, it predates the Koran by many centuries. Of course, the Koranic version of the story *could* be the correct version. The OT version *could* be corrupted. Jews and Christians will opt for the biblical version, while Muslims will hold fast in the belief that theirs is the more accurate telling. But this is beside the point. If it is the same God who is revealing himself in these stories, why does he do so in a contradictory way? Both versions of the story cannot be true. And it is precisely this kind of obvious contradiction that will make itself clear as we move into the later sections of the book.

How are Jews Themselves Portrayed in the Koran and in the New Testament?

It is important to point out that there is a great deal of condemnation of the Jews in the Christian Bible. And, tragically, the history of the church is replete with anti-Semitism. Most scholars believe that Jews generally had it better under Muslim rule than under Christian rule in the Middle Ages. Some scholars even attribute the Nazi atrocities during the Holocaust as the harsh portrayal of Christ-denial by Jews in the NT. I personally think this is

³¹ Imad N. Shehadeh, “Reasons for Islam’s Rejection of Biblical Christology,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 161 (July-September 2004): 279.

³² Glasse, *The New Encyclopedia of Islam*, 221.

going too far.³³ The NT never calls on Christians to shed the blood of Jews, any more than it calls on Christians to slaughter indigenous peoples in Central and South America. Rather, what happens in the pages of the NT is an in-house, inter-Jewish dispute. It is Jesus, the devout Jew, arguing with those other devout Jews, the Pharisees. It is Paul, who describes himself as a “Hebrew among Hebrews,” (Philippians 3:5) a student of the great Rabbi Gamaliel (Acts 22:3) who is kicked out of Jewish synagogues in the Book of Acts. In Romans (9:1-3) Paul tells us, in agonized prose, that he would abandon his own salvation if his Jewish brothers and sisters would listen to his gospel message. Paul ends by stating that “all Israel will be saved.” This of course is a disputed passage, with some Christian theologians taking it literally, while others assume that only Jews who become Christians are truly Israel. Whatever it may mean, there is no comparable statement in the Koran. Even in the Gospel of John, where the term “the Jews” seems to be used dozens of times as a synonym for evil, it has been shown that the author of John had corrupt Jewish leaders, not the Jews en masse, in mind.³⁴ In fact, as I have shown elsewhere, the Jew-on-Jew criticism is no different from the brutal language the Jewish prophets use against their own people in the Hebrew Bible.³⁵

When we turn to the Koran’s depiction of Jews, the portrayal is mixed. Sometimes Jews are praised; sometimes they are condemned.³⁶ But in the Koran, the harsh critiques of Jews are coming from a non-Jewish source, Muhammad.³⁷ In the Koran, the negative “concern with the Jews is striking. The Qur’an addresses the Christians in a handful of passages scattered among its chapters, but it addresses the Jews [in a condemnatory way] regularly and repeatedly.”³⁸ Part of the criticisms stems from Muhammad’s

³³ For a good introduction to the history of Christian anti-Semitism, and how some scholars think Christian theology did indeed lead to the horrors of the Holocaust, see James Carroll, *Constantine’s Sword* (New York: Mariner Books, 2002).

³⁴ See, for example, Urban C. Von Wahlde, “The Johannine Jews: A Critical Survey,” *NTS* 28 (1982): 33-60.

³⁵ “Are We Asking the Wrong Questions About the Shoah? Eliezer Berkovits as Post-Holocaust Jewish Apologist,” *Conservative Judaism* 57, no. 1 (Fall 2004).

³⁶ Farid Esack, “The Portrayal of Jews and the Possibilities for their Salvation in the Koran,” in *Between Heaven and Hell: Islam, Salvation, and the Fate of Others*, ed. Mohammad Hassan Khalil (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), 207-233.

³⁷ I am assuming Muhammad wrote the Koran. Muslims believe that the Koran is the very words of God, compiled by Muhammad after many years of revelations he received. More on Koranic authorship will be presented in the final chapter.

³⁸ Gabriel Said Reynolds, “On the Qur’anic Accusation of Scriptural Falsification (tahrif) and Christian anti-Jewish Polemic,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 130, no. 2 (April/June 2010): 200. The author’s thesis is that the Koran is

frustration that the Jews in Medina (the city Muhammad fled to after he was chased out of Mecca by strident polytheists) refused to honor him as a prophet. "Not surprisingly, the *gentile* [italics mine] Muhammad's revelation of his prophetic status to the Jews provoked their leaders and rabbis to scorn."³⁹ It was difficult for the Jew to consider Muhammad to be part of the prophetic Jewish lineage when he not only was a gentile, but also manifested "ignorance of the Hebrew scriptures."⁴⁰

The Koran seems to have no sense of the Jews as God's chosen people, or of the all-important concept of God's covenant with the Jews: "in the Qur'an the covenant is also understood to be universal, applying to all human beings. But for the majority of Sunni Muslims, and for the Sufi tradition, it is also believed to be pre-temporal, established before the beginning of creation as we know it."⁴¹ Again, we see a diminishing of the importance of Judaism here, for they are not the first people to be in a covenant relationship with God. "In the Qur'an, however, the eternity of the covenant stems from its being made between God and all of humanity before the beginning of creation. The majority of exegetes maintain that this is alluded to in Q. 7:172, "And when thy Lord took from the Children of Adam, from their loins, their progeny and made them bear witness concerning themselves, 'Am I not your Lord?' They said, 'Yea, surely, we bear witness.'"⁴² This is not to say the Koran does not recognize the various covenants God made with the Jews. It does, but there is nothing special about them, for God has made a covenant with all of humanity. "According to the Qur'an, many among the Jews and the Christians believed that they were not like any other people whom God had created, that their covenant with God had elevated their status with Him; and that they were the friend of God to the exclusion of other people."⁴³

When we look at the Apostle Paul's struggle in Romans 9-11, we see the agony that Paul, a Jewish believer in Jesus, feels because the bulk of his people have rejected Christ as Lord and Messiah. Paul simply cannot say

harder on Jews than it is on Christians because the Koran is following the tradition of the Christian Syrian Fathers, who were especially harsh at times in their writings against Jews. Whether or not Reynolds's theory is true or not, the fact remains that the holy book of Islam is especially biased against Jews and their religion.

³⁹ Rose, "Muhammad, the Jews," 11.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 13.

⁴¹ Joseph E. B. Lumbard, "Covenant and Covenants in the Qur'an," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 17, no. 2 (June 2015): 5.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Farid Esack, *The Qur'an: a Short Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Oneworld, 2002), 50.

the Jews are “wrong” about Jesus; he knows too much of Christianity is based upon the OT revelation. Thus he cautions Christians against spiritual arrogance (11:17-21), and finishes chapter 11 with the words, “all Israel will be saved” (11:26). There simply is nothing in the Koran like this. Part of the reason is, a Muslim might say, is because the Koran is made up entirely of divine revelation, not the theological musings of men. Whatever Paul’s enigmatic phrase “all Israel” may mean, the calling of God is irrevocable, Paul tells us. Despite his intense devotion to Christ, he believes, somehow, that the covenant God made with the Jews is still in effect. The Jews are chosen, Paul realizes, not because of their personal merit, but because God has decided to elect them. Compare this with the lack of election in the Koran, “the Qur’an is void of any signs of grace to the unworthy The Qur’an does not see God’s work of grace in chosen people, who nevertheless are sinful. In God’s relationship with humankind nothing depends on His grace and everything depends on human merit.”⁴⁴ Even the Koran cannot entirely avoid the apparently special nature of the Jews in God’s revelation, but again, that special stature is minimized. “Muslim commentators insist that the special favour God bestowed on Israel applied only to Moses’s lifetime.”⁴⁵

Christianity’s deep reliance upon Judaism is evident in the Book of Acts. Acts is the story of the gospel’s presentation to the non-Jewish world. In Acts 10:9-16, the Apostle Peter has a dream in which he is shown a variety of foods that were considered unclean according to Jewish custom. That Peter is a devout Jew, eager to maintain the traditions of his ancestors, can be seen from his reaction in this passage. He at first resists God’s command to “kill and eat” the ceremoniously unclean animals he sees.

Later in the Book of Acts, the Council of Jerusalem is considering how “Jewish” new Christian converts are required to be. James, the leader of the Jerusalem Church, says the following. “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.” (15:19-21). Even if the NT at times indicates the Jews have been rejected from their ancient covenant (and according to Paul in Romans, that is highly debatable) the concept of the covenant God made with the Jews is viewed as axiomatic.

⁴⁴ Shehadeh, “Reasons for Islam’s Rejection,” 279, 281.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 281. Shehadeh goes on to explain that “[t]he Jews breaking of the Mosaic Covenant caused them to lose forever the land promised to them” (281). The implications for the current Palestinian-Israeli troubles are obvious.

Even setting aside some parts of that covenant require the approval of the Jerusalem Church. Still, a basic question the NT wrestles with is, are Jews still in this covenant? If so, which Jews? How does the “new” covenant initiated by Christ relate to the “old” one made with Abraham and Moses? It is true that Christianity broadens the definition of the covenant so that Gentiles may enter the once Jewish-only fold. But of course a new covenant and a New Testament require an old covenant and an Old Testament. The Jewish covenant matters little for Islam, since in the Koran, “the eternality of the covenant stems from its being made between God and all of humanity before the beginning of creation.”⁴⁶ So, before we even arrive at what Christian theologians often call the attributes (characteristics) of God, before we even delve into the contentious matter of Christ’s identity, a very clear contradiction has already arisen. Who are God’s chosen people? And when and with whom did God enter in a covenantal relationship? The OT/NT and the Koran give a very different answer. That answer is to be expected, for the divine being that inspires those scriptures, God and Allah, are very different beings, as will become apparent.

We are now in a rather confusing place theologically speaking. Jews deny that Christ is the same God as the Yahweh of the OT. Yet Christians claim that Christ and the God of the Jews are in such a harmonious trinitarian relation as to be virtually one. And Islam claims that all three religions worship the same God, although Jews and Christians do not do it correctly! We next need to examine *how* Christians describe God, and how Muslims describe Allah.

Do God and Allah Predestine Their Followers?

As stated above, the God of the Bible is a God who elects His followers. When Christ institutes the “new” covenant at the last supper, his followers would have clearly understood that the “old” covenant was in Christ’s mind. To what extent God elects men and women to follow him has been one of the great debates within Christian theology, and continues to divide Christians. Those who believe that no one can come to the Father except through me (John 14:6) are called Calvinists, after 16th century French theologian John Calvin (AD 1509-1564), who stressed that God chooses His followers; they do not choose Him. Calvin of course did not invent the doctrine, and merely claimed that he was taking his cue from the later writings of St. Augustine (AD 354-430). Augustine, in turn, found the idea of God’s electing grace in, for instance, Paul’s words in Ephesians that

⁴⁶ Lumbard, “Covenant and Covenants,” 5.

Christians were chosen by God before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:5), seem to strengthen the Calvinist, or predestinarian position. However, other Christians who see following Christ as a choice, rather than something they have been elected to, have passages of scripture too which do appeal as well. 2 Peter 3:9 famously declares that God is not willing that any should perish. This “freewill” position is often called Arminianism, after the anti-Calvinist theologian Jacob Arminius (AD 1560-1609). However, as Roger E. Olson has shown, Arminians traditionally have not rejected the idea of predestination unto salvation, but rather what is often called reprobation, or the idea that God consigns certain people to hell before the foundation of the world.⁴⁷ This is often called “double predestination.” Here is Arminius on the matter of “single predestination.” “The decree of the good pleasure of God in Christ, by which he resolved within himself from all eternity, to justify, adopt and endow with everlasting life,...believers on whom he had decreed to bestow faith.”⁴⁸ Of course, divine foreknowledge, or God knowing who will respond to His call is tied to God’s predestination in a way that is not Calvinistic, but that God does indeed elect in some way is held even by Arminians. “Few of Arminianism’s theological critics would claim that Arminians do not believe in predestination in any sense; they know that classical Arminianism includes beliefs in God’s decrees respecting salvation and God’s foreknowledge of believers in Jesus Christ.”⁴⁹ Even in Roman Catholicism, where Calvinism has always been basically viewed as heretical, the concept of God as a predestining Lord is found, though with less rigor than in Calvinism. The Roman Catholic catechism says the following:

To God, all moments of time are present in their immediacy. When therefore he establishes his eternal plan of "predestination," he includes in it each person's free response to his grace: "In this city, in fact, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place." For the sake of accomplishing his plan of salvation, God permitted the acts that flowed from their blindness.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Roger E. Olson, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006), 179-99.

⁴⁸ Quoted in *ibid.*, 181.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁵⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 600,
<http://www.scborromeo.org/ccc/para/600.htm>.

Regardless of what committed Calvinists or devout Arminians claim, the NT evidence on predestination is capable of either interpretation. So, it is not my intention to resolve the debate here. I only wish to point out the concept of God's election of believers into a covenant relationship with him; however that election is understood, is quite apparent in the NT.

In Islam, too, we find a similar situation exists. Some passages of the Koran seem to teach the freewill view of human response to God, while other passages stress Allah's total control over all that happens in the universe. "Many brief Qur'anic texts not only emphasize God's absolute control but also suggest an almost capricious freedom in determining the ethical course of individual people."⁵¹ As in Christian theology, there has long been a debate in Islam as to how much Allah predestines people, and how much freedom they have to respond to him. The great Muslim thinker Averroes (AD 1126-1198) taught that there were three different opinions on predestination but, and this is key, Averroes believed that "God does not act by election."⁵² The emphasis that many Islamic thinkers of the Middle Ages place on predestination now seems overwrought, according to many Muslim thinkers.⁵³ That predestination and freewill are taught by the Bible and by the Koran is self-evident from the texts, but the Koran has no concept of persons being elected in the covenantal sense that we find in the NT. Election into a covenant of salvation would make no sense from the Koranic perspective, for "[t]he Qur'an states repeatedly that every man and woman individually and every person collectively are alone responsible for what they do—a doctrine that underlies the Qur'anic rejection redemption."⁵⁴ Compare this with the following passage from the Book of Acts in the NT: Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call." (Acts 2:38-39). Not only is this type of familial/covenant-based thinking absent from the Koran, it is explicitly rejected by it. There is a "Qur'anic critique of chosenness based on membership in [sic] particular group. When people make such

⁵¹ John Renard, *Islamic Theological Themes: A Primary Source Reader* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2014), 9-10.

⁵² Ismail Mohamad, "Concept of Predestination in Islam and Christianity: Special Reference to Averroes and Aquinas," *The Islamic Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (Jan. 2000): 80.

⁵³ Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 23.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

claims, God responds to them not only by denying the claim but by reasserting their status as creations of God, a status shared with the rest of humanity.”⁵⁵

If the concept of covenant was so important to God throughout the centuries covered by the Old and New Testaments, why does it suddenly disappear from the Koran? We would expect a certain continuity on God’s dealings with humanity, yet the concept of divine calling into a covenant relationship simply does not appear in the Koran. This does not mean that the Koran is wrong in its portrayal of God. The Koranic portrayal could certainly be the correct one, while the biblical one is incorrect. But it seems doubtful that they are both true. Both Bible believers and Koran believers do not want to claim that God reveals contradictory messages, yet that seems to be the case here. The differences between the Bible’s God and the Koran’s Allah become even more pronounced, as will be evident in the next section.

Is love an Attribute of God? Is it an Attribute of Allah?

Christians are fond of saying that the God of Christianity “is love.” It is more correct to say that love is an attribute, or characteristic of God, for He is far more than simply love. He is power, wisdom, judgment, grace, etc. But love is certainly at the heart of the NT’s description of God’s revelation in Christ. God in the pages of the OT is said to be a God of love, though perhaps it is fair to say His wrath seems sometimes more apparent than His love. Still, consider the following passages from the Hebrew Bible, “he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin” (Exodus 34:6-7). Or,

“Rend your heart
and not your garments.
Return to the LORD your God,
for he is gracious and compassionate,
slow to anger and abounding in love,
and he relents from sending calamity” (Joel 2:13).

⁵⁵ Jerusha Lampsey, “Embracing Rationality and Theological Tensions: Muslim Theology, Religious Diversity and Fate, ”*Between Heaven and Hell: Islam, Salvation and the Fates of Others*, ed. Mohammad Hassan Khalil (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), 246.