

monastic asceticism a latter-day innovation, not an original part of Jesus' way. Second, the New Testament suffers from deletions and embellishments added after Jesus' death by men who did **not** know him. Third, the description of Jesus as God's son is considered by Muslims a later, blasphemous suggestion.

Muslims venerate Jesus as a divinely inspired human but never as "the son of God." In the same vein, we treat the concept of the Trinity as a late footnote to Jesus' teachings, an unnecessary "mystery" introduced by the North African theologian Tertullian two centuries after Jesus' disappearance. Nor do Muslims view his "death" as an act of atonement for mankind's sins. Rather, along with the early Christian theologian Pelagius, Islam rejects the doctrine of original sin, a notion argued into church doctrine by St. Augustine around the year 400. It might almost be said that Islam holds a view of Jesus similar to some of the early apostolic versions condemned by the fourth-century Byzantine Church. Once Constantine installed Christianity as the Roman Empire's state religion, a rage for orthodoxy followed. The Councils of Nicaea (325), Tyre (335), Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431), and Chalcedon (451) were official, often brutal attempts to stamp out heterodox views of Jesus held by "heretical" theologians.

Rulings by these councils led to the persecution and deaths of tens of thousands of early **unitarian** Christians at the hands of more "orthodox" Christians who condemned them. Most disputes centered on divergent interpretations of the Trinity. For this reason, historians of religion sometimes see in these bloody divisions one of the root causes for early Islam's firmly unitarian outlook.

Then and now, no more dangerous religious mistake exists for a Muslim than dividing the Oneness of God by twos or threes.

**Despite these important differences**, however, the Quran repeatedly counsels Muslims not to dispute with other monotheists over matters of doctrine. People, it says, believe differently for good reasons. In fact, that is a part of Allah's will.

As forces of hate try to pull Muslims and Christians apart, we are in desperate need of a unifying force that can bridge the widening gap of interfaith misunderstanding and mistrust. That force

could be the message of love, peace and forgiveness taught by Jesus and accepted by followers of both faiths.

**In Jesus' Name:** Late-night television evangelists. These comb-over charlatans reduce the power of God to a rabbit they can yank out of their hats. One preacher "testified" about how praying in the name of Jesus got him a BMW (donated by some poor sap viewing his prophesy that he'd receive the luxury-mobile). A sea of heaven-raised hands and muffled "hallelujahs" erupted from the crowd.

This man encouraged the packed auditorium to revamp their prayer lists with luxury cars, mansions, or any other over-the-top extravagant desires and demand it with "all authority" in the name of Jesus. After all, the Bible does say whatever one prays in Christ's name will be granted. It's the typical gospel of prosperity propaganda, "if you really had the faith, you'd be rich, successful, etc."

There will always be greedy showmen contriving grandiose spectacles to exploit the concept of faith and manipulating Jesus' name to satisfy their lust for riches, fame and power. And while the "showiness" of it all can be alluring, people need to shape their prayers in accordance to the less attention-grabbing submissive faith that mirrors the character of Jesus, in the spirit of humility, sacrifice, servanthood, and kindness.

The **illusion** of Jesus as a person's own personal Genie is a tempting one, but real growth and relevancy in prayer life requires learning to pray as Jesus did and **not** in his "name."

Revisit and rethink the Lord's Prayer. Note that Jesus (p) is praying **to** God. Not to himself but to his Creator. Our Father, which art in Heaven; Hallowed be **Thy** Name; **Thy** kingdom come; **Thy** will be done, in earth as it is in heaven; Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us; And lead us not into temptation; But deliver us from evil; For **thine** is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Those born-again "American Christians" waging war, killing Muslims **are arrogant**. Believing & acting on the myth of redemptive violence. Beware of Jesus' words in the Bible: "I never knew you! Get away from me, **you workers of lawlessness.**"

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# of Islam of Christianity Jesus

THE WORD; THE SPIRIT; THE MESSENGER

## Through a Muslim Lens

The first person to attest to Muhammad being a Prophet of God was a **Christian**

When the Muslims were being persecuted who came to their rescue but a **Christian**

**"...and nearest among them in love to the believers will you find those who say, 'We are Christians,' because amongst these are people devoted to learning and people who have renounced the world, and they are not arrogant."**  
(Quran 5:82)

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Jesus of Nazareth is the most widely revered religious figure in the world. Not only is he central to Christianity, the largest religion in the world, he is also venerated throughout Islam, the world's second largest faith. Christians may be surprised to learn that Muslims believe in the Virgin Birth and Jesus' miracles. **But this shared interest in his message goes much further.**

In our scientific age, the miraculous side of Jesus' story has greatly obscured his role in the prophetic tradition. In this sense, there may be more important questions for Muslims and Christians than whether he walked on water or raised the dead.

In the Muslim view, Jesus' essential work was not to replicate magic bread or to test our credulity, but to complement the legalism of the Torah with a leavening compassion rarely expressed in the older testament. His actions and words introduce something new to monotheism: They develop the merciful spirit of God's nature. Jesus confirmed the Torah, stressing the continuity of his lineage, but he also developed the importance of compassion and self-purification as crucial links between learning the words of God's message and possessing the wisdom to carry it out.

Oddly enough, some of the recent work by New Testament scholars seems to have reached a view of Christ not all that different from Muslims'. For us and for these scholars, Jesus appears **not** as a literal son of God in human form, but as an inspired human being, a teacher of wisdom with a talent for love drawn from an unbroken relationship to God. Both versions present him as a man who spoke to common people in universal terms.

Two events in the life of the prophet Muhammad may help explain why Muslims revere the Christian Jesus.

The first event involves an elder resident of Mecca named Waraqa bin Nawfal. This man was an early Arab **Christian** and an uncle of Muhammad's wife, Khadija. We know he could read Hebrew, that he was mystical by nature, and that he attended Khadija and Muhammad's wedding in about 595 C.E. Fifteen years later, a worried Khadija sought

Waraqa out and brought her husband to him.

At the time, Muhammad was a 40-year-old respected family man. He attended this "family therapy" session in a rare state of agitation. He was frightened. He had been meditating one evening in a cave on the outskirts of town. There, while half asleep, he had experienced something so disturbing that he feared he was possessed. A voice had spoken to him.

Waraqa listened to his story, which Muslims will recognize as a description of Muhammad's first encounter with the angel Gabriel. When it was finished, Waraqa assured him he was not possessed.

"What you have heard is the voice of the same spiritual messenger God sent to Moses. I wish I could be a young man when you become a prophet! I would like to be alive when your own people expel you."

"Will they expel me?" Muhammad asked.

"Yes," the old man said. "No one has ever brought his people the news you bring without meeting hostility. If I live to see the day, I will support you."

Christians will recognize in Waraqa's remarks an aphorism associated with Jesus: "A prophet is not without honour, save in his own country." **But that a Christian should first have verified Muhammad's role as a Prophet may come as a surprise.**

The second important event concerning Islam and Christianity dates from 616, a few years after Muhammad began to preach publicly. This first attempt to reinstate the Abrahamic tradition in Mecca met (as Waraqa had warned) with violent opposition.

Perhaps the Meccans resented Muhammad's special claim. Perhaps his message of a single, invisible, ever-present God threatened the economy of their city. A month's ride south from the centres of power in Syria and Persia, poor remote Mecca depended on long-distance trade and on seasonal pilgrims who came there each year to honour hundreds of pagan idols, paying a tax to do so.

At any rate, Muhammad's disruptive suggestion that "God was One" and could be found anywhere did not sit well with the businessmen of Mecca. Many new Muslims were being tortured. Their livelihoods were threatened, their families persecuted. As matters grew worse, in 616 Muhammad sent a small band of followers across the Red Sea to seek shelter in the Christian

kingdom of Axum. There, he told them, they would find a just ruler, the **Christian** Negus, who could protect them. The Muslims found the Negus in his palace, somewhere in the borderland between modern Ethiopia and Eritrea.

And protect them he did, after one Muslim recited to him some lines on the **Virgin Mary from the Quran**. The Christian Negus wept at what he heard. **Between Christians and Muslims, he said, he could not make out more difference** than the thickness of a twig.

These two stories underscore the support Christians gave Muhammad (p) in times of trial. The Quran distills the meaning from the drama:

"Those who feel the most affection for us (who put our faith in the Quran), are those that say, 'We are Christians,' for priests and monks live among them who are not arrogant. When they listen to what We have shown Muhammad, their eyes brim over with tears at the truth they find there..."

Even today, when a Muslim mentions Jesus' name, you will hear it followed by the phrase "peace and blessings be upon him," because Muslims revere him as a Prophet.

"We believe in God, and in what has been sent down to us, what has been revealed to Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and their offspring. What was given to Moses and to Jesus and all the other prophets of the Lord. We make no distinction among them."

As these lines from the Quran make clear, Muslims regard Jesus as one of the world's great teachers. He and his mentor John the Baptist stand in a lineage stretching back to the founder of ethical monotheism. Moreover, among Muslims, Jesus is a special type of prophet, a messenger empowered to communicate divinity not only in words but by miracles as well.

Muslims, it must be said, part company with some Christians over the portrait of Jesus developed in the fourth and fifth centuries. Certain fictions were added then. Three of these come in for special mention: First, Muslims consider

**Jesus, the son of Mary, was a Messenger of God,  
and His Word which He bestowed on Mary, and a Spirit proceeding from Him**

(Quran 4:171)