
[OHP]

Will the Real God Please Stand Up (The God of the Bible and the God of Islam Compared)

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You've probably heard the old joke about the Jewish Rabbi, Catholic Priest, and Baptist Minister [OHP] who were on a fishing trip. It was a scorching hot day out on the lake in their boat, and so after an hour or so, the Rabbi said: "I'm thirsty! I'm going to go and fetch my cooler." He hopped out of the boat, walked across the water to his car, fetched his cooler, then walked back across the water to the boat.

The Baptist Minister was astounded — surely only a very holy man could walk on water!

A few minutes later, the Catholic priest said: "Fellas, I'm getting hungry. Excuse me a minute." He climbed out of the boat, walked across the water to his car, fetched his lunch bag, and then walked back across the water to the boat.

The Baptist Minister was once again amazed at the apparent holiness of his friend. But by now, he too was hungry and thirsty and figured if his friends could do it, so could he. "Gentleman," he said, "it's my turn." He set down his rod, jumped out of the boat, and promptly sank like a stone into the lake.

The Rabbi looked at the Priest and said: "Hey, Jim, do you think we have told him about the rocks?"

That's an extremely old (and pretty awful joke). But did you notice something? Look at the three protagonists — a Jew, a Catholic and a Baptist Minister. That dates the story. If you were telling this story in a way as to reflect today's multicultural climate, you'd have to add to the Rabbi, Priest and Minister a Muslim Imam, a Buddhist Monk, a Hindu guru, a Wiccan Witch and dozens of others.

[OHP] We live in an extremely pluralistic world. In many of our North American cities, one can choose from Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Atheism, Islamism. And that wealth of religious choice leads to a problem — Christians are often accused of being arrogant for our claim that the God of the Bible and Jesus Christ are unique. How bigoted, how intolerant, how narrow minded it is said to claim that Christianity alone is true.

Of course that claim to uniqueness lies at the very heart of the biblical story. Listen to these words that the Israelites sang in

[OHP] Exodus 15:11:

“Who among the gods is like you, O LORD? Who is like you — majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?”

Elsewhere in scripture, we read words [OHP] like these:

“For this is what the LORD says — he who created the heavens, he is God; he who fashioned and made the earth, he founded it; he did not create it to be empty, but formed it to be inhabited. He says: ‘I am the LORD, and there is no other’.
(Isaiah 45:18)

And then, of course, turning to the New Testament, there are Jesus’ words:

[OHP] *“I am the way, the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me.*

Here we hit the problem of exclusivity head on. How as Christians can we hold onto claims like these when we live surrounded by so many competing religions? Isn’t it more tolerant — more progressive — to say that all religions are essentially the same?

I’d like to explore this idea this morning by using the world’s second biggest religion, **[OHP]** Islam, as a comparison. Islam is a great test case to explore the question of the exclusivity of Christ and the uniqueness of the biblical God. Because there’s a persistent belief — certainly held by Muslims, certainly held by many in our culture,

and held by many Christians that Allah — the God of the Qur'an — and Yahweh, the God of the Bible — are essentially the same.¹

But does this idea stand up? I'm a great believer that [OHP] “contrast is the mother of clarity”² and so I'd like to briefly compare the biblical God and the qur'anic god and highlight four major differences — differences that I believe reveal to us just how amazing, how wonderful, how unique is the God of the Bible.

[OHP] First, the God of the Bible is a God who is *relational*.

This is the thrust of the whole story of scripture, from the opening pages to the very last chapter. In the opening chapters of Genesis, we read of how God was to be found, walking and talking in the garden with Adam and Eve. God walks and talks with Abraham (Genesis 17-18), speaks to Moses face to face “as a man speaks with his friend” (Exodus 33:11), and, indeed God speaks with his people throughout the Old Testament. When human beings disobey, when sin comes between God and man, God seeks out and pursues humankind, indeed the story of scripture is the story of God winning

¹ For the Keynote slide: ‘Christians and Muslims worship one and the same God ... I reject the idea that Muslims worship a different God than do Jews and Christians.’ — Miroslav Volf, *Allah: A Christian Response* (New York: HarperOne, 2011) 14.

² Os Guinness, ‘Relevance or the Gospel?’, <http://www.churchleaders.com/outreach-missions/outreach-missions-articles/139230-os-guinness-on-outreach.html> (accessed 17 January 2013).

us back. And at the close of the Bible, in Revelation 21, [OHP] we are promised that in the age to come:

The dwelling of God will be with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people and God himself will be with them and be their God.

The Bible uses highly relational language to describe God. He is described as a father, as a husband, as a friend. He is the relational God, the God who reveals himself by name — Yahweh — and the Bible's call is for us to be in relationship with him. That's what it means to be a Christian.

[OHP] For the Muslim, on the other hand, there is no such relationship to be had with their god. [OHP] Allah, the god of the Qur'an, is so distant, so transcendent, so remote that Muslims are not asked to enter into a relationship with him. According to the Qur'an, Allah did not walk and talk in the garden with Adam and Eve. He is not present with his people in heaven. And he did not take on flesh in the person of Jesus. He is the absent god. The only "relationship" that exists between Muslims and Allah is that of master and servant — not father or friend. [OHP] Muslim theologian Shabbir Akhtar wrote this:

Muslims do not see God as their father ... Men are servants of a just master; they cannot, in orthodox Islam, typically attain any greater degree of intimacy with their creator.³

Just servants. In contrast, Jesus Christ said: “I no longer call you servants, but friends.”⁴

This is the heart of the difference between Christianity and every other religion. Indeed, it is what reveals [OHP] Christianity to be far more than a “religion”. Religion says that if we follow the right rituals, obey the right rules, have the right mystical experience, then we can satiate the spiritual hunger within. Christianity, on the other hand, says that none of our efforts can ever bridge the gap between us and God — if it could, if we could earn our way into God’s favour, for example, then he would owe us something. But the gap can be bridged from God’s side. “Do all religions lead to God?” [OHP] The truth is that *no* religion leads to God — only God can lead us to God, and that is what is offered in Jesus Christ.

[OHP] Second, the God of the Bible is a God who *reveals himself* and who can be *known*

³ Shabbir Akhtar, *A Faith for All Seasons* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1990) 180.

⁴ John 15:15.

At the heart of the Christian faith stands not a list of doctrines, not a set of moral commands, but a relationship. The astonishing claim of the [OHP] gospel (Romans 8:15-16)⁵ is that by putting our trust, our faith, our hope in Jesus, we can be adopted into God's family and become not slaves, but children. The gospel is primarily about a relationship.

Of course, it's only possible to have a relationship with somebody if they make themselves known and the God of the Bible is a God who does that consistently. From beginning to end, the Bible tells the story of a God who reveals not just his commands but his character, his very self. [OHP] For example, in Exodus chapter three, in the story of the burning bush, God speaks personally with Moses, revealing his personal name — Yahweh, "I am". Ultimately the biblical theme of God revealing himself is seen in the person of Jesus, who tells his disciples in John 14:9 that "anyone who has seen me has seen the Father".

Not only has the biblical God revealed his character, his heart, his name, his own person in his son, Jesus, but because of that, he can be known. [OHP] In Jeremiah 9:23-24, God says:

⁵ Use this on the Keynote slide: For you did not receive the spirit of slavery leading again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption, by whom we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself bears witness to our spirit that we are God's children.

Let not the wise boast of their wisdom or the strong boast of their strength or the rich boast of their riches, but let the one who boasts boast about this: that they understand and know me.

[OHP] Again, this is utterly different from Allah, the god of the Qur'an, [OHP] who does not reveal himself in this way nor allow himself to be known. Muslim writer Isma'il al Furuqi [OHP] writes:

Allah does not reveal Himself to anyone in any way. Allah reveals only his will ... Allah does not reveal himself to anyone ... that is the great difference between Christianity and Islam.

It should move our hearts with compassion this morning that millions of Muslims bow in submission to a god they can never know, a god who refuses to make himself known. That should surely motivate us to share the wonderful news of a God who can be known and who has made [OHP] himself known. And at the same time, it raises a question, a challenge for us: *do you know him?* Are we appreciating the astonishing gift the biblical God has given us — of knowing him — or are we taking him for granted? *Do you know him?*

[OHP] One of the most famous thinkers of the seventeenth-century was the French mathematician and physicist Blaise Pascal. He was

born into a culture steeped in enlightenment, rationalistic thinking and was an extremely intelligent teenager. But as a young man, it quickly began to dawn on him that reason alone was not enough — and so Pascal began to explore spiritual things, trying to find something that would both answer the questions of the mind and the yearnings of his heart. On the night of 23 November, 1654, Pascal had a dramatic encounter with God, so powerful that he wrote down his experience and sewed the parchment into the lining of his coat, where it was only discovered after his death. [OHP] This is what he wrote:

The year of grace 1654. Monday, 23 November.

From about half past ten in the evening until half past midnight.

Fire.

Certainty, certainty, heartfelt, joy, peace.

God of Jesus Christ.

The world forgotten, and everything except God.

Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy.

Jesus Christ.

Sweet and total renunciation.

Total submission to Jesus Christ.

Everlasting joy.

I will not forget thy word. Amen.

The God who can be known, the God who reveals himself, who has revealed himself in Jesus. Do you know him?

[OHP] Third, the God of the Bible is a God who is *love*

The Bible is very clear that one of God's primary characteristics is love. [OHP] In Exodus 15:13, Moses and the Israelites, as we saw, sang of God's "unfailing love". a theme that runs throughout the entire Old Testament. Turning to the New Testament, the theme of God's love continues and is summed up in the amazing [OHP] verse in 1 John 4:16 — "God is love". Love is not something the God of the Bible *does*, but something *he is*. Indeed, we love and serve a God who is Trinity — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — and so at the heart of who God is lies a loving relationship.

[OHP] When we turn to Allah, the god of the Qur'an, we see something very different. [OHP] Nowhere are we told that Allah is love — indeed, because he is not triune, it would not be possible for him to be loving unless he first created something to love. We are also given numerous lists of the people Allah does not love and nowhere are we told that he takes the initiative — rather Allah only loves those who first love him. Indeed, some Muslim theologians go further. [OHP] Murad Hofmann wrote:

Allah is self-sufficient ... this fundamental self-description excludes that Allah is in love with his creation ... [I]t is safer and more accurate not to speak of “love” when addressing His clemency, compassion, benevolence, goodness, or mercy.⁶

What an utter contrast from the God of the Bible, who loves *everybody* — even the sinner. [OHP] This is most beautifully illustrated in the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15, where the father in the parable is full of love for both his younger, errant son and his older, uptight, hyper-religious son. God loves us so much that he made the first move — [OHP] Romans 5:8 says “God demonstrates his own love for us in this — while we still sinners, Christ died for us.” Only the God of the Bible loves you like this.

[OHP] Fourth, the God of the Bible is a God who *suffers*

We live in a world that is broken. A world in which there is evil, a world in which there is suffering, a world in which there is pain. And the remarkable thing about the God of the Bible is that he does not stand aloof from that world, but knows what it means to suffer.

In the late 1860s, all was going well for Christian lawyer, [OHP] Horatio G. Spafford. His legal practice was hugely successful

⁶ Murad Wilfried Hofmann, ‘Differences between the Muslim and the Christian Concept of Divine Love’ in *14th General Conference of the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought* (Amman, Jordan, 2007) 8.

and he and his wife Anna had a wonderful family — a young son and four beautiful daughters. Horatio was well known in the Chicago Christian community, where he was involved in social action — he was a leading abolitionist — and was friends with major Christian leaders like D. L. Moody. It was easy to be a Christian when life was so good. But in 1870, tragedy struck — their four-year old son died suddenly of scarlet fever and then, a few years later, Anna fell sick. To put all this behind them, they planned a trip to Europe — a holiday was just what they needed. However, at the last minute, a business emergency arose and Horatio had to delay his departure a few days — so Anna and the four girls went on ahead and Horatio planned to follow on a separate ship a few days later.

[OHP] On November 22, 1873, the ship that his wife and daughters were travelling on collided with another ship in the middle of the Atlantic ocean and sank in twelve minutes. Over two hundred people drowned. Anna was picked up and rescued and taken to Cardiff in Wales, from where she telegraphed home to Horatio these words: “Saved alone.”

Horatio took the first ship he could bound for England to join his wife. As they sailed across the Atlantic, the captain sent a message to Horatio from the bridge: “A careful reckoning has been made and

I believe we are now passing the place where your wife's ship was wrecked. The water is three miles deep". That night, Horatio shut himself up alone in his cabin, and wrote the words of this now famous hymn (in fact we sang it yesterday in chapel):

[OHP] *When peace like a river attendeth my way,*

When sorrows like sea billows roll;

Whatever my lot Thou hast taught me to say,

"It is well, it is well with my soul!"

For me, be it Christ, be it Christ hence to live;

If dark hours about me shall roll

No pang shall be mine, for in death as in life

Thou wilt whisper Thy peace to my soul.

Only the God of the Bible can comfort like he can because he understands suffering. In Psalm 23 and numerous other biblical passages, we hear that the God of the Bible is *with* us as we journey through life, even in our very darkest moments — he understands suffering because, in Jesus, he has been through it himself — because of his great love for us.

The love of the God of the Bible is also demonstrated in what he has done to deal with the sin and shame that separate us from him. The

Bible tells us that God grieves for his people, grieves over their sin, rebellion and unfaithfulness. [OHP] And that ultimately, through Jesus and the cross, God paid the price to deal with that sin and brokenness — [OHP] as Isaiah 53:4 tells us, he “took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows”.

[OHP] This is all very different from the Allah of the Qur'an.

[OHP] The god of the Qur'an is not a god who suffers — Allah feels no grief as a result of our sins or pain or suffering. Allah in the Qur'an certainly gets angry at sin; and that anger is expressed in wrath and judgment. But there is no heart response and nothing done by the qur'anic god to deal with the problem of sin. [OHP] As Muslim theologian, Muhammed-al-Burkawi puts it:

Allah can annihilate the universe if it seems good to Him and recreate it in an instant. He receives neither profit nor loss from whatever happens. If all infidels became believers and all the wicked pious He would gain nothing. And if all believers became infidels it would not case Him loss.⁷

Indeed, in Islam, the Muslim must carry the weight of his or her own sin, hoping that on the day of judgement their good deeds outweigh

⁷ See Zwemer, S. M. 'The Moslem Doctrine of God' p56

their bad. There is no redemption, no atonement, no cross at the heart of the qur'anic god's interactions with the world.

[OHP] At its heart, Islam is a moral self improvement plan. Keep Allah's commandments, obey his rules, and you can earn your way to paradise. It doesn't matter if 49% of your life is rotten to the core, provided that the other 51% looks good enough, because the god of the Qur'an simply doesn't care. The God of the Bible, on the other hand, not merely cares deeply about our pain and brokenness, but he has *done* something about it — the wonderful news of the gospel is that Jesus died to deal with our brokenness and to offer us forgiveness and reconciliation — freely, because the cost would be more than we can bear. Islam is a moral self-improvement plan.

[OHP] Christianity is a heart-transformation plan. Jesus did not die to make bad people good; he died to make dead people live.

[OHP] When we look the God of the Bible, love and suffering, judgement and forgiveness are inextricably linked. The God of the Bible is a God who is relational and can be known. A God who is love and whose love for even the sinner saw him willing to pay the price of the cross.

This is a huge contrast to the God of Islam. Allah, the God of Islam, is not relational, he does not make himself known, he is not a god of

love, and is not a god willing to take on our sorrows and infirmities. He is quite simply a very different god indeed.

So where should we go with this? My prayer is that as you grasp the uniqueness, the difference, the wonder of the biblical God, three things might happen:

[OHP] First, it should inspire and thrill you. All concepts of god are not the same. All religions are *not* the same. There are profound differences and those “differences make a difference”. There is no one like the God of the Bible. That should inspire us to worship, to sing, to praise, to follow him wholeheartedly and it should fill our hearts with joy and delight and wonder and excitement.

[OHP] Second, that joy and amazement should — indeed *must* — overflow into evangelism, into the desire to share the good news of that God with those, like our Muslim friends, who know nothing of a God like that. A God who has revealed his love, his character, his forgiveness, his suffering so clearly and so powerfully, most especially in Jesus Christ. Jesus said: “Go and make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19). In twenty-first century, multicultural America, the nations have come here. Let’s ensure that as well as welcoming them to our land, we introduce them to our Lord.

[OHP] And finally, all this should challenge us to take the gospel seriously. The God of the Bible is a God who is relational, a God who can be known, a God who is love, and a God who has suffered. He is utterly unique. We live in a world that is broken, we are each touched by suffering — and by evil, too; each of us is, in our default mode, alienated from God by our rebellion and self-centredness. But the God of the Bible has not abandoned us, but in Jesus Christ and especially in the cross, reached out to offer us forgiveness and reconciliation and adoption into his family. The most important question for any of us is the one that Jesus asks: “Who do you say that I am?” How will you answer this morning?

[OHP] — RZIM IDENT SLIDE