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Answering Jihad

A Better Way Forward

Nabeel Qureshi

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Who Are the True Muslims—Violent or Peaceful Muslims?

I have indirectly addressed this question in the past few pages, but it merits a direct response.

A month after September 11, 2001, when President George W. Bush asserted that Islam was a religion of peace, the Washington Post reported Jordanian cleric Abu-Qatada al-Filistini acerbically responding, “Is he some kind of Islamic scholar?” Although he asked the question rhetorically, it is relevant to point out that most of the people who repeat such statements about Islam are not Muslims, let alone scholars of Islam.

A survey of Islamic scholars clarifies the matter. Muslims are torn about whether Islam is a religion of peace, mostly along lines of geography and culture. Islam is proclaimed to be a religion of peace almost entirely by modern Muslims in conversation with Westerners. Yet from the very earliest era of Islam until at least the nineteenth century, Muslim theologians were largely comfortable with violence, even systematizing and codifying it.

Are Terrorists Muslim?

I have heard quite a few Western Muslims say that terrorists are not really Muslim, but such comments are tragically ironic. Western Muslims who say this are engaging in the Islamic doctrine of excommunication, *takfir*, pronouncing Muslims to actually be non-Muslim. They usually make no reference to the doctrine of *takfir* itself and may have no idea what the word *takfir* means, yet they are claiming to be the true Muslims. When radical Muslims engage in *takfir* and pronounce Western Muslims to be non-Muslim, they do so in light of Islamic doctrine.

By denouncing their radical Muslim counterparts, these Western Muslims are attempting to be the new Muslim hegemony and to silence the voices of Muslims who disagree with them. It is a peaceful version of what radical Muslims are also attempting, declaring theirs to be the one true form of Islam. On one hand this is little more than propaganda, while on the other it can represent an unfortunate Muslim tendency to see one's own practice of Islam as the only legitimate version.

A 2011 Pew Forum survey titled "The World's Muslims: Unity and Diversity" asked Muslims in thirty-nine countries whether there is only one correct way to understand Islam or if there are multiple possible interpretations. According to the survey report, in an astounding thirty-two of those countries, "half or more Muslims say there is only one correct way to understand the teachings of Islam." In the remaining seven countries, no more than 58 percent of respondents said Islam is open to multiple interpretations. Even in the United States, only 57 percent of Muslims said Islam is open to multiple interpretations. This strong tendency toward intolerance of internal disagreement is, perhaps, reflective of why many Western Muslims are so ready to declare terrorists as non-Muslim.

Of course, radical Muslims often see Western Muslims as apostates as well, but their disavowals are more systematic and, arguably, more Islamic. Whereas Western Muslims denounce violent Muslims based on a perceived majority commitment to peacefulness, radical Muslims usually disavow Western Muslims on the basis of the latter not strictly adhering to Islamic law. Once again, the interplay is ironic. Western Muslims appeal to democracy to excommunicate radical Muslims who appeal to sharia.

There can be no doubt by any useful definition of Muslims that Islamic terrorists are Muslim. They worship Allah, they strive to follow Muhammad, they perform their Islamic duties, and they have great concern for the international Muslim community. Relatively speaking, they tend to place more emphasis on the foundations of Islam than do average Muslims in the West who proclaim that Islam is a religion of peace.

So Are Peaceful Muslims “Good Muslims”?

The radical Muslim emphasis on foundational texts and their disregard for centuries of Islamic tradition tend to resonate with Protestant sensibilities. In fact, Protestants often ask me if peaceful Muslims are “good Muslims” in light of the violent trajectory of the Quran and Muhammad’s life. If radical Muslims are placing a strong emphasis on following the Quran and the example of Muhammad, does that mean peaceful Muslims who largely ignore violence in Islamic foundations are not being loyal to “true Islam”?

As I mentioned earlier, Muslims can legitimately practice peaceful forms of Islam. Outside of the Protestant “Scripture alone” perspective, most religions impute some authority to persons, and obedience to those authorities is a part of the faith. Just as a “good Catholic” is one who obeys the Pope and adheres to the traditions of the Catholic Church, so a “good Muslim” is one

who obeys his or her teachers and adheres to the traditions handed down in the practice of Islam. For this reason, those Muslims who practice the peaceful Islam that their tradition teaches are being “good Muslims.”

Perhaps the question Protestants intend to ask is whether an insistence upon peace is consistent with the foundations and origins of the Islamic faith. I have attempted to address that question head-on in this book: No, it is not. Muhammad engaged in many battles, both offensive and defensive, both provoked and unprovoked, leading the Muslim community in eighty-six raids and battles during the last nine years of his life. The Quran’s final commands are found in surah 9, chronologically the last major chapter of the Quran, and they are the most violent commands of all. The name of the chapter, “al-Baraa,” means “the Disavowal.” Not only was the surah a disavowal of peace treaties, but in many classical interpretations of Islam it was also a disavowal of other peaceful verses in the Quran through abrogation. The chapter commanded Muslims to fight their enemies, even family members, even if they did not want to, even against those who had not fought Muslims, even in the face of death, and even if martyrdom was the result, as that would lead to their salvation. This was to establish Islam as the religion that would prevail over all others. These Quranic teachings launched Muslims into world conquest and domination, and Muslims insistent on peace today must either ignore or reinvent whole swaths of Islamic history and thirteen centuries of Islamic tradition to dissociate themselves from violent Islam.

Many peaceful Muslims do not do so consistently, instead simply ignoring some traditions as if they did not exist. In that case, though they may still be “good Muslims,” they are not being consistent thinkers.

Conclusion

Islam is a diverse religion with many expressions, though unfortunately there is a demonstrable tendency among Muslims to assume only one legitimate interpretation of Islam. On account of this, many Muslims accuse one another of apostasy, whether peaceful Muslims disavowing radical Muslims or vice versa.

The reality is that Islam can be formulated either peacefully or violently, but violent expressions of Islam adhere more consistently and more literally to the foundational texts of the Islamic faith, the Quran and the hadith. Peaceful versions of Islam must reinvent traditions from Muhammad's life in order to be internally consistent, or they must ignore them outright. Regardless of which of these two options peaceful Muslims choose, the common assertion that violent Muslims are not truly Muslim is uninformed or even disingenuous.

Question 13: Do Muslims and Christians Worship the Same God?

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Do Muslims and Christians Worship the Same God?

In my first year of medical school, a male physician from India approached me, offered the Muslim greeting of peace, and told me that he knew my mother. I returned his greeting, but I had a hunch he was mistaken. My mother maintains *pardah*, the Islamic practice of wearing a burqa and socializing outside the family only with other women. I found it unlikely a strange man would know her or talk about her in this casual manner.

On the other hand, he was a physician, he was from India, and he appeared to be part of the Muslim community. Perhaps he did know her? Upon asking further, he assured me that he did. I recall him saying, “She lives here in Norfolk, and she is from Pakistan, is she not? I see her every now and again in the hospital. She is a smart, very kind woman.” That certainly did sound like her. My mother is very kind and smart, and she is from Pakistan. Every now and again she came to Norfolk for treatment, too, though she primarily went to the naval hospital in Portsmouth. He was wrong about where she lived, though. We lived in Virginia Beach, not Norfolk, but the two cities are right next to each other. Though he was wrong about a detail or two, I concluded he knew my mother after all.

But I was wrong. As the conversation progressed, he told me that he had admitted some of my mother's patients from the emergency room. Apparently he thought my mother was a colleague of his, but my mother is not a doctor. Although we were both talking about the same role, that of my mother, we were not talking about the same woman. I later discovered there was a Dr. Qureshi in the emergency room at the children's hospital, and from then on I was able to inform dozens of people that, no, she was not my mother.

I see intriguing similarities between that conversation and the one our nation is having as I write this chapter about whether Muslims and Christians worship the same God. The question is pressing because the national conversation has grown controversial in light of the refugee crisis and concerns about jihad.

The Wheaton Controversy

Wheaton College, a flagship of evangelical educational institutions, placed one of its professors on administrative leave on December 15, 2015, for "theological statements that seemed inconsistent with [their] doctrinal convictions." Five days prior, while donning a hijab and staking her position on a variety of controversial matters, Larycia Hawkins had written on Facebook, "I stand in religious solidarity with Muslims because they, like me, a Christian, are people of the book. And as Pope Francis stated last week, we worship the same God."

Wheaton's decision to give Hawkins "more time to explore theological implications of her recent public statements" ignited a firestorm of controversy. One strong voice in the fray was Yale Professor Miroslav Volf, a theologian greatly respected for his contributions to Christian-Muslim dialogue, who wrote in the *Washington Post*, "There isn't any theological justification for Hawkins's forced administrative leave. Her suspension is not about theology and orthodoxy.

It is about enmity toward Muslims. More precisely, her suspension reflects enmity toward Muslims, taking on a theological guise of concern for Christian orthodoxy.”

Such a dialogue-stifling judgment from a highly acclaimed Ivy League scholar was surprising, but it served to illustrate the enormous tensions in Christian-Muslim relations. As a former Muslim, I have many Muslim family members and friends I spend time with regularly, and I often encourage Christians to consider gestures of solidarity with the hope that, somehow, this affection will trickle down to the Muslims I know and love. I have even recommended that Christian women consider wearing the hijab in certain circumstances, as well as counseled Christian men to consider fasting with their Muslim neighbors during the month of Ramadan, as long as it is clear these gestures are out of Christian love and not submission to Islam.

So without a shred of “enmity toward Muslims,” I must say that I disagree with Hawkins and Volf. My position is that Muslims and Christians do not worship the same God, but given the complexity of the matter we ought to stop demonizing those who disagree with us.

Why Many Conclude that Muslims and Christians Worship the Same God

For years after leaving Islam and becoming a Christian, I believed that Muslims worshiped the same God as Christians but were simply wrong about what he is like and what he has done. After all, I had been taught as a young Muslim to worship the God who created Adam and Eve, who rescued Noah from the flood, who promised Abraham a vast progeny, who helped Moses escape Egypt, who made the Virgin Mary great with child, who sent Jesus into the world, who helped the disciples overcome, and who is still sovereign today. Is that not the God of the Bible?

For that matter, the Quran asserts that the Torah and the Gospels are inspired scripture and that Jews and Christians are people of the book. The Quran tells Muslims to say to Jews and Christians, “our God and your God is One, and unto Him we surrender” (29:46). If the Quran asserts that Muslims worship the same God as Jews and Christians, does that not settle the matter?

For years I thought it did, and the great overlap between Islam and Christianity meant we were talking about the same God. Just as when the Indian physician was right about many details and wrong about only a few, leading me initially to conclude we were both talking about my mother, so I used to think that Muslims disagreed with Christians on a few details but we were talking about the same God.

I no longer believe that. At a certain point the differences go beyond details to essential matters of identity, and it turns out we are talking about different people. When the Indian physician said my mother lived in Norfolk, he was wrong about a minor detail, and we could still have been talking about the same woman. But when he said she was a doctor, it was not just a detail: he was wrong about an essential characteristic. It became clear that he was envisioning someone else. In the same way, the Muslim God is different in essential characteristics from the Christian God, which is why I now conclude they are not the same God.

This matter is further complicated by the distinction between role and person. In my conversation with the Indian doctor, we were talking about one role, the one filled by my mother, but was it the same person? Clearly not. In the same way, Muslims and Christians envision the same role when they speak of God, the unique Creator of the universe of whom there can only be one. But is it the same person? In my view, clearly not.

I do not condemn those who think Muslims and Christians worship the same God, because it is a complex issue. But the identity of the Muslim God is different from that of the Christian God in essential characteristics. The Quran seems to agree with this assessment. Though Muslims and Christians worship a God who fulfills the role of Creator, the persons they see occupying that role are quite different.

How the Christian God and Muslim God Differ in Essential Characteristics

Let's start with the obvious. Christians believe Jesus is God, but the Quran is so opposed to this belief that it condemns Jesus worshipers to hell (5:72). For Christians Jesus is certainly God, and for Muslims Jesus is certainly not. For this reason alone, no one should argue as Volf has done that "there isn't any theological justification" for believing Christians and Muslims worship different Gods. There is, and it is obvious when we consider the person of Jesus.

Another difference between the Islamic God and the Christian God is God's fatherhood. According to Jesus, God is our Father, yet the Quran very specifically denies that Allah is a father (112:1-4). In 5:18, the Quran tells Muslims to rebuke Jews and Christians for calling God their loving Father, because humans are just beings that God has created. So the Christian God is a father, while the Muslim God is not.

Similarly, when we consider the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, Islam roundly condemns worship of the Trinity (5:73), establishing in contrast its own core principle of *Tawhid*, the absolute oneness of God. *Tawhid* emphatically denies the Trinity, so much so that it is safe to say

the doctrine of God in Islam is antithetical to the doctrine of God in Christianity. Not just different but opposed.

This last difference is profound. The Trinity teaches that God is not a person, but three persons: Father, Son, and Spirit. To assert that the God of Islam is the same person as the God of Christianity becomes almost nonsensical at this point, as the Christian God is tripersonal, two persons of whom Islam specifically denies in the Quran.

There is more to be said about the differences between the Christian God and the Muslim God, especially in terms of his character as it relates to jihad, but I will return to those issues in Questions 15 and 16. The point I want to make here is simply that the essential characteristics of God are different in Islam and Christianity. They are more different, in fact, than the woman the Indian physician had misidentified as my mother. In theory, my mother could have been a doctor, but the tripersonal Christian God cannot even in theory be the monadic Muslim God. The two are fundamentally incompatible. This is why, according to Islam, worshiping the Christian God is not just wrong; it sends you to hell.

Why Do People Say Muslims and Christians Worship the Same God?

So how can people argue that Muslims and Christians worship the same God? Primarily by giving undue priority to the Islamic assertion that it is so. Even though the Quran says that worshiping Jesus or the Trinity will send Christians to hell, it somehow asserts that Muslims and Christians worship the same God (29:46). Though the logic is not clear, it is asserted as blunt

fact that must be accepted. Ultimately, this is the reasoning of those who believe, as I once did, that Muslims and Christians worship the same God, and it is flawed.

The similarities between the God of Islam and the God of Christianity are superficial and at times merely semantic. Though Islam claims that the Muslim God has done some of the same things as the Christian God and sent some of the same people, these are minor overlaps and far less essential to the reality of who God is than fundamental characteristics of his nature and persons. Islam and Christianity overlap at points on the former, but they differ fundamentally on the latter.

Volf's rejoinder to this line of thinking is that Christians believe they worship the same God as Jews even though Jews do not worship the Trinity. How then can Christians say Muslims worship a different God without also saying the same of Jews? He argues that would be inconsistent or hypocritical.

Yet the response should be obvious to any who have studied the three Abrahamic faiths: the Trinity is an elaboration of Jewish theology, not a rejection. By contrast, *Tawhid* is a categorical rejection of the Trinity, Jesus' deity, and the fatherhood of God, doctrines that are grounded in the pages of the New Testament and firmly established centuries before the advent of Islam. The earliest Christians were all Jews, incorporating their encounter with Jesus into their Jewish theology. Nothing of the sort is true of Muhammad, who was neither a Jew nor a Christian. Islam did not elaborate on the Trinity but rejected and replaced it.

Additionally, Volf's assumption that Jews did not in the past worship something like the Trinity is debatable. Many Jews held their monotheism in tension with a belief in multiple divine persons. Though the term *Trinity* was coined in the second century AD, the underlying principles of the doctrine were hammered out on the anvil of pre-Christian Jewish belief. It was not until

later, after Jews and Christians had parted ways, that Jews insisted on a monadic God. The charge of Christian hypocrisy is thus anachronistic.

Conclusion

The question of whether Muslims and Christians worship the same God is complex. Wheaton College made a reasonable decision in giving Hawkins time off to consider the implications of her statement. Whether or not she was aware of it, her statement allowed Islamic assertions to subvert the importance of essential Christian doctrine. Yet she ought not be faulted harshly, as these issues are murky. What is more dangerous is the path taken by Volf, accusing people of bigotry to shut down valid conversations. One can both love Muslims and insist that the God they worship is not the same as the Christian God.

Christians worship the triune God: a Father who loves unconditionally, a Son who incarnates and who is willing to die for us so that we may be forgiven, and an immanent Holy Spirit who lives in us. This is not who the Muslim God is, and it is not what the Muslim God does. Truly, *Tawhid* is antithetical to the Trinity, fundamentally incompatible and only similar superficially and semantically. Muslims and Christians do not worship the same God.