

Conversation with a Muslim and a Christian

An e-mail conversation between a Christian (Don Closson) and an earnest Muslim revealed the mindset and attitudes of a follower of Allah.

Introduction

It is always easier to deal with religious belief systems in the abstract. Cataloguing what a particular religion believes concerning the nature of God, human nature, salvation, and morality is usually a straightforward affair. Actually dialoguing with someone who holds to these beliefs can be far more interesting and challenging. So, although I possessed a general knowledge of what Islam teaches, I found that only by carrying on a long-term discussion with a Muslim did I gain a sense of the mindset and attitudes of a follower of Allah. A door was opened for me to experience some of the passion and zeal to be found in the Muslim evangelist. The discussion occurred via email, which muted some of the emotions that often accompany religious exchanges, but they still came through with considerable intensity.

The opportunity to carry on a discussion with a Muslim apologist arose when a campus minister asked if I would help respond to charges against the claims of Christianity being made by an Islamic leader at his school. I agreed, and soon realized that a number of others, both Muslim and Christian would be listening in on our discussion. Once introduced to my Muslim counterpart, let's call him Ali, the interchange began quickly. I wish that I could report that at the end of our discussion Ali placed his faith in Christ. In fact, I don't think that I made much of an impact at all on his thinking. Ali, as with all of us, chooses what to accept as evidence. He refused to even attempt to see any of the issues we discussed from a Christian perspective. All I can do is pray that God might use our discussion down the road sometime, if God chooses to soften Ali's heart.

Over a six month period our discussion primarily focused on the person of Christ. Ali would ask questions and I would attempt to give an answer. I quickly realized that Ali's tactics and intentions were different from mine. He often used ridicule and intimidation in his responses and would pick and choose what to discuss and what to ignore, deciding when to move on to another topic in order to avoid really considering the material at hand. I have never considered myself a debater, I would much rather have a discussion with people who are really interested in the topic and graciously exchange viewpoints. If I were to enter another dialogue like the one with Ali, I would have to realize that I cannot assume that everyone thinks the way I do regarding dialogue across religious worldviews. The Bible tells us to be ready to give the reason for the hope that we have in Christ, and to do so with gentleness and respect. Don't assume the other person will follow the same rules.

Next we will look at the issue of the person of Jesus Christ from a Muslim perspective and begin to consider how one might make a biblical response.

Christological Mathematics

Since I had never spoken to a Muslim regarding the claims of Christianity, I was looking forward to the kinds of questions that might be raised. I was not surprised that the first issue that came up was the nature of Jesus Christ, since this really is the heart of the matter. Muslims believe that Jesus was a prophet, perhaps even a unique prophet, but not in any sense God. Ali got the conversation going by declaring that there was no place in the Bible that says that Jesus is both 100 percent God and 100 percent man. Along with this initial challenge Ali pointed out that he was very sensitive to proper interpretation and would be looking for incidents of verse twisting in order to make a

passage say something that it actually doesn't.

I sent Ali a [2500 word essay](#) that I had written earlier that contained multiple arguments for the deity of Christ and numerous biblical examples of Jesus saying and doing things that only make sense if He were indeed equal with God the Father. My response included indications of Christ's self-perception as God, as well as statements made by His disciples portraying their belief in His deity. I assumed that Christ's humanity was not the real issue. So I did not see a need to defend it. Ali's response was interesting. He noted that Muslims do indeed believe that Jesus was born of a virgin and performed many miracles, with the help of God. But then he stated, "From your response I think we both agree that the Bible does not claim that Jesus is both 100% God and 100% man." He later added, "If you don't have any verses to give us then let's move on to the next point."

At first I thought that Ali had not gotten my entire essay. How could he have missed my point? He reassured me that he had gotten it and then declared that since there is no verse that states the 100 percent deity and 100 percent humanity of Christ, we can go on. What I eventually realized was that he was demanding a single verse that actually declared a mathematical set of percentages for the mixture of deity and humanity in Christ. I was a bit surprised to say the least. When I asked for confirmation, he said that that was indeed what he was looking for.

Most people know that the verse numbers in the Bible were added at a later date for convenience sake. After reminding Ali of passages like Philippians 2:6-7 and the first chapter of John, I asked him why it was necessary to find this complex truth in one verse. He ignored my question and responded by claiming victory that indeed, the Bible does not claim in one verse that Jesus is 100 percent God and 100 percent man, and he declared that we would now move on to the next point.

I must admit that I was a bit baffled, but not ready to concede the issue.

The Importance of Context

Ali's debating tactics might be called the "slash and burn" technique: never admit to using a weak argument and make good use of sarcasm to intimidate your opponent. He also likes to claim victory in the middle of an exchange of ideas and then declare that we are moving on to the next issue. However, before I moved on to his next question I tried once more to answer his first. All that got me was the charge that I was avoiding his second point. He wrote,

You see Don, what you have done in your last email is you completely avoided this verse, and then you went looking in the Bible for other verses in which you think Jesus claimed to be God and gave them to us thinking that it would some how make us "forget" about John 5:30.

What about John 5:30? Jesus says; "By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but Him who sent me." Ali claims that the verse shows that Jesus is inferior and helpless, that in fact He can do nothing. The key to this passage, as always, is in the context. I pointed out to Ali that in John 5:19-23 Jesus says that "He can do only what He sees His Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does." Jesus raises the dead, has been given all judgment, and is to be given the same honor that the Father is given. Ali replied, "Great, this is what a messenger does, this doesn't make him god."

I pointed out to him that a messenger communicates on behalf of someone else. He does not claim to do what someone else does. Muhammad claimed to be a messenger of Allah, not to do what Allah does. In fact, Jesus didn't claim to show the way as a messenger might, but He claimed that He was the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). In fact, the same chapter says that the Jews recognized that Jesus was claiming equality with God the Father and tried all the harder to kill him (John 5:18).

Ali might disagree with this claim, that Jesus is God, but that is exactly the argument that is being made by this chapter and the rest of the book of John.

Ali pulls verses from their context and refuses to deal with the entire passage. When given evidence from the chapter that contradicts his views, he changes the meanings of words and ridicules what he finds to be unreasonable. Next we will look at Ali's rejection of the Trinity.

The Trinity

It is not surprising that Ali does not understand nor acknowledge the Trinitarian relationship between Jesus and the Father. Surah 4 verse 171 in the Qur'an calls on people of the book, Christians, not to commit excesses in their religion. It claims that Jesus was just a messenger of Allah and His Word, which was given to Mary. It literally tells Christians to "say not Trinity" for Allah is one. It is possible that Muhammad believed that the Trinity consisted of Jesus, the Father, and Mary. He rejected Jesus as the Son of God because he pictured Jesus as a physical offspring from a union of God the Father and Mary. This would commit the ultimate sin in the eyes of Islam, equating a physical thing with God the Creator (shirk). Ali writes, "To say that Jesus is God or Son of God is not only a mockery of Godhood, but blasphemy of the lowest order and an insult to the intelligence of men."

As a result, Ali alternates between denying that the Bible teaches that Jesus is God and ridiculing as illogical the notion the Jesus can be both God and man. He refuses to acknowledge the notion of the Trinity, even when it is the best way to bring together difficult passages. When enough evidence is given that the Bible does teach that Jesus is both God and man, admittedly a difficult concept, Muslims reject the Bible as having been corrupted. They really have no other choice since the Qur'an specifically rejects the Trinity. It literally comes down to either rejecting their prophet Muhammad or accepting the validity and message of the Bible.

An interesting side note to this discussion is that Ali's position is very similar to believers of other religious groups who respect Jesus but reject Christianity. Jehovah's Witnesses claim that the Bible was corrupted following the passing of the apostles, and that they now have its correct interpretation, as do Mormons and the Baha'is, an offshoot of Islam. Mormons claim that their prophet Joseph Smith received their view of Jesus, found in the Book of Mormon, from the angel Moroni. Muhammad claimed to have received the Qur'an from the angel Gabriel. It is obvious that all of these revelations cannot be true as they each give us a very different Jesus. Paul has something to say about these different gospels. He writes to the church in Galatia:

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! (Galatians 1:6-8)

A Difficult Decision

As I mentioned earlier, the outcome of the six-month interchange was neither a conversion, nor even a congenial agree-to-disagree ending. In fact, I ended the dialogue after realizing that continuing the exchange could profit little and that my time might be better spent elsewhere. I must add that this was not an easy decision to make. I wondered whether I had given up too easily or had somehow not communicated adequately the hope that I have in Christ.

However, any hesitation to end the conversation was erased when I received a reply to my note to

terminate the exchange. Ali told me that I could not quit. That in fact, he would announce on various web sites that both I and Probe Ministries had nothing to say regarding the reliability of the Bible if I did not respond to his challenges. This confirmed to me that Ali was simply using me to gain access to a larger audience in order to get out his message. He had no interest in a real discussion where ideas are considered and a minimal amount of graciousness exists.

I went back to the Scriptures to see how Jesus handled such people and what He taught His followers to do when they encountered ears that would not hear. In the synoptic Gospels, Jesus told his apostles that, "[I]f any place will not welcome you or listen to you, shake the dust off your feet when you leave, as a testimony against them." The meaning communicated was that those who reject the gospel must now answer for themselves. When the gospel is taught, it brings both judgment and salvation.

In Matthew 7:6 Jesus tells the apostles, "Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces." Dogs and pigs do not signify any specific race or ethnic group. Jesus is teaching that those who have treated the gospel with scorn and clearly rejected the salvation it offers and have been hardened by their contempt are to be avoided.

When Paul and Timothy were opposed by the Jews, who became abusive, the book of Acts (18:5) records, "[H]e shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, 'Your blood be on your own heads! I am clear of my responsibility.'"

I get little pleasure from reading these passages. I wanted to change Ali's mind. However, when I told Ali that I was praying for him, he replied, "Don't preach to me, prove it to me." Given that he had ignored much evidence already, it told me that his ears were closed. However, I will continue to pray that God will soften Ali's heart and that one day he might have ears to hear the Gospel.

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