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REL 1300

15 April 2016

Islam and Christianity: How they are the same

Of the age old conflicts of humanity, there are few that are as pervasive as the clash between Islam and Christianity. Though there have indeed been times during which Christians and Muslims coexisted peacefully, the two groups have been locked in what can be described as a Hobbesian state of war. It is sad that this is the reality we are faced with, for the differences in the doctrines of Christians and Muslims are so dwarfed by their similarities. It is clear that the essences of both religious traditions are nearly identical. If one truly and objectively evaluates the nature and history of each religion, it will be infallibly concluded that Islam and Christianity are essentially the same set of ideals contextualized in two different cultures.

The similarities between Christianity and Islam begin with the very stories of their origin. Both faiths are Abrahamic, meaning that they both trace their roots back to Abraham. It is said in the Bible as well as the Qur'an that Abraham's older son Ishmael is the Father of the Arabs and younger son Isaac is the Father of the Hebrews. The differences in the accounts of the story of Abraham found when comparing Islamic and Christian scripture show that the similarities between the two groups is overshadowed by the more negative aspects of human nature from the very beginning.

Among the differences in accounts, one of the most notable is that a great deal of emphasis was placed on the fact that Ishmael was the older son of Abraham in Islamic

texts, while a great deal of emphasis was placed on the fact that Isaac was the favorite son of Abraham in the Bible. This is a prime example of the way that the human desire to distinguish ourselves from one another has led to an overlooking of our similarities. Both traditions tell narrative in a manner that makes their patriarch seem superior. On the other side of that coin, each faith regarded the other as inferior, for to think that you are superior is to think that others are inferior.

This is not the only occurrence of this either. In fact, it is simply the beginning of a condition that will continue from the inception of these faiths to the present day. The similarities between the religions grow with time as well. Some would be shocked to discover the truth that both Christianity and Islam believe that Jesus was sent by God. Further, though the accounts in each faith's scripture differ, both faiths also believe in Jesus' virgin birth. Those who headed the crusades or those who led Ottoman conquests of the Balkans must have forgotten this fact.

Since each faith regards itself as superior, the faith deemed inferior is naturally considered flawed or false. How could the faith considered to be superior possibly err? If this were so, that faith would not be superior now would it? The problem with the above logic, which is held by both Islam and Christianity, lies in the reasoning behind the naming of each faith as superior. A Christian—especially one by birth—ultimately regards Christianity as superior because *he is a Christian*, not because of the tenants of Christianity. Just think, how many of those who claim Christianity as their faith have engaged in detailed studies regarding the differences between their faith and other faiths?

This can be a dangerous way to think, for it causes individuals to regard others as inferior for no other reason than they are different in their beliefs. Though many Muslims

and Christians do not hold this to be true, it is an idea that has eluded eradication since its inception. History shows that there have always been those in the two religious sects that maintain a bellicose mentality towards people of the other faith.

Once this mentality is formed, evidence of it becomes apparent throughout the course of history. It occurs on both sides of the spectrum—whether it be a Christian effort to reclaim the middle east as in the crusades or a Turkish effort to convert ancient Slavic Christian boys into Janissaries. In each of these cases, the side perpetrating the conflict regarded themselves as superior. In their minds, they were doing these “heretics” a kindness by forcing them to convert or die. This thinking has degraded the image of the other side in the eyes of each religion.

This brings us to an important point—the use of the word heretic. The flippant use of the word heretic has been the cause of a great deal of strife in the effort to unify Christians and Muslims. It is all too easy to label a person as such, and once the word is used to describe someone, it damages their reputation simply because it causes people to question a person’s righteousness. For the majority of human history, being labeled as a heretic was the kiss of death. A person who was outside of the protection of the church was essentially alone in the world—nobody in their right mind would want to be caught dead associating with a heretic for fear that they would be labeled a heretic by association.

Because of this natural selfishness, the easiest way to circumvent the risk of being associated with a heretic was to openly project hatred for them. This was practiced within both religions, stratifying the religious community and making religions become more distant from one another. Forced with a choice, people deliberately chose to ignore the

similarities between the two religions in an effort to secure their own wellbeing.

Defending those considered to be heretics by the general public became something of a taboo topic. As a result, only those who truly took their ideals to heart dared discuss this topic, and fewer still in view of the public.

Only in recent history where governments have stifled an environment in which interreligious dialogue is tolerated and even promoted has the examination of the similarities between Islam and Christianity entered the scope of mainstream culture. Even today this type of dialogue is only possible in certain countries. It truly is a tragedy that many of the places where this type of conversation is prohibited, such as the Middle East, are the same places rocked by the religious conflicts of old.

Though a mounting effort has been made to fight senseless self-righteousness in recent years, the problem remains. Change is slow, and there still remain a great deal of individuals who think their religion superior simply because they are a member of that community. There is no example more blatant than the activities of modern day terrorist groups such as ISIS and Boko Haram. The central pillar used to support their doctrine is the idea that the “heretics” of the West must be punished and it is up to the superior, truly righteous group to carry out this task.

Groups such as these view their mission not as simply a right, but a responsibility. It is much the same as the Western Imperialist idea of “civilizing” native populations. This is simply more proof of humankind’s apparent need to distinguish themselves from others by establishing some sort of hierarchy. This occurs even within religions; many a Protestant regards his faith superior to Catholicism, and Sunnis and Shiites are constantly at odds. It is clear that human tendencies too often corrupt benign ideologies.

Now, it is obvious that there are differences in the rituals and doctrines of the two religions. It would be remiss to claim that the religions are identical. Rather, the foundations of these religions are the same. They promote the same general ideals of peace and glory to their God. They even believe in the same God. The differences between the faiths are easily explained. Each faith has tailored the essence of this faith to fit the culture that is worshipping. Variables such as the structure of political society, ethnicity, climate, cuisine, etc. are all interwoven in the fabric of each religion. The culture of the original practitioners of each religion is inseparable from the very nature of the doctrine. It is quite literally part of said doctrine.

Were we not predisposed to favor our own ends over those of others, there would be no need to write these words. If this were so, explaining to someone the degree of similarities between Islam and Christianity would be akin to explaining that water is wet. However, due to our survival instinct and desire to be great, we have largely disregarded the fact that Christians and Muslims are brothers and sisters. Given the frequency of brotherly betrayal documented in the Bible and Qur'an alike, it is almost no surprise that Muslims and Christians sometimes treat each other in the same manner as Cain treated Abel.

Though throughout history the chances of harmony between Christianity and Islam have seemed bleak, there is hope yet. As time goes on and tolerance becomes increasingly normal, we are beginning to realize that we have been fighting with our own religious blood and flesh. Hatred and extremism is threatened now more than ever, and though the growth of groups such as ISIS and Boko Haram is alarming, it will not last—it cannot last. In a world where people than ever can speak out without fear of being struck

down, it is our duty to decry the claims of extremists and finally embrace the fact that Christians and Muslims truly are brothers in arms.

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