

Islam 101
Transcript of Part 5
Common Beliefs of Muslims and Christians
The Future of Interfaith Dialogue

presented on March 5, 2015

by Dr. Natana DeLong-Bas

So you can see there are many points of commonality in beliefs between Muslims and Christians. We all believe in God as the creator of all life. We all believe in God as a source of justice, certainly as the one who is going to judge us on Judgment Day and hold us accountable and decide where we are going to spend the afterlife.

All of us believe in the importance of belief in one God. Sometimes it's hard for Muslims to understand the concept of the Trinity, and I get into this debate with them all the time: "you people believe in three gods. You're polytheists." "No, we believe in one God, in three persons, three capacities, three functions, but it's one God, [ARABIC], not [ARABIC]." And so that can be a little confusing, at times.

Perhaps one of the most important beliefs that we share has to do with the creation of the first two human beings, Adam and Eve. Both faith traditions believe that God created them, placed them in the garden as caretakers, and that there was an incident with a serpent who tempted them into doing something that they should not do. And here's where the stories diverge a little bit.

In Christian tradition, God asks Adam what happened. Adam blames Eve. Eve blames the serpent. God punishes everybody. And there's this sense of collective accountability. This Original Sin that is passed down from one generation to the next, to the next, that we're all accountable for.

Muslims do not believe in the doctrine of Original Sin. Muslims believe in individual accountability. Adam and Eve were responsible for their own actions and had to take accountability for that; and each one of us is responsible for our own actions and decisions, and we will be held accountable for those. I will not be held accountable for the actions of my husband, my grandfather, great great great aunt Tillie, or whomever. My children are not responsible for what I do. I'm responsible for my own actions.

In the Qur'an, both also immediately accept responsibility for what they have done. Instead of trying to pass the buck and blame it on somebody else, they recognize immediately that they are at fault, and they ask God for forgiveness. And God offers that forgiveness to

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them. There's still punishment and accountability, they get kicked out of the garden, but God offers them forgiveness and tells them that he will provide them with guidance for the rest of their lives.

One other interesting point I would make with respect to Creation. [The] Book of Genesis, in chapters two and three, talks about the order of Creation. And we all know that Adam was made first and then God made some animals and did some other things. And Eve, God created second, and that has led to certain theological interpretations of women as lesser, inferior, subordinate, over time.

In the Qur'an, first, man and woman are created at the same time, from a single soul, and one is not created before the other. And this reality of being created from a single soul means that they are also—neither one is ever complete without the other. So if you ever heard people talk about that beautiful idea of the soul mate—there's this idea that in order to be whole again, you need to find that *zawj*, that spouse, that completes you.

Mary and Jesus are certainly very present in the Qur'an. It's interesting to note that they are always talked about with reference to each other. Mary is always described as the Mother of Jesus, and Jesus is always described as the Son of Mary. So they go together as a pair.

The Qur'an confirms the virgin conception and birth of Jesus. There's this scene where Mary has left her family, and she's taken shelter out in a far location, and an angel appears to her. And she's worried about this angel who looks like a man, and she warns him that she's a chaste woman. She's not interested in fooling around. He needs to leave her alone.

And he tells her that he's bringing her a message from God, that she is going to have a child. And her response is very similar to that in the Bible. "Really? How's this going to happen? Because I've never known a man." "Don't worry; with God, everything is easy." God simply says, "Be," and it is. It's the same way that the God of the Old Testament creates in the first chapter of the Book of Genesis.

The terminology that is used to describe Jesus is also reminiscent of biblical language. Jesus is referred to as a Word from God and a Spirit from God, and those phrases are only used in the Qur'an to describe Jesus. It's reminiscent of the language opening the Gospel of John. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. So we have this Word from God and Spirit of God confirming that this Jesus has a very special status and no earthly father.

And the Qur'anic telling of the story, which we'll take from chapter 19 of the Qur'an—Mary is actually the only woman who is named in the Qur'an. We have more information about the Virgin Mary in the Qur'an than we do in the entire New Testament. Some of this information comes from books that didn't make it into the canonical Bible, specifically the Gospel of Mary, which is used by Coptic Christians until today.

So we have, in chapter 19, this description of—Mary has accepted receiving Jesus into her, and comes to the moment of childbirth, which is an extremely vulnerable moment and an extremely painful moment. And we see this depiction of her, standing here, holding onto the trunk of a palm tree, crying out, "I put to God that I had not experienced this." She's

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alone. She's having this baby. It's very painful and God responds to her, "Don't worry, I'll take care of you. Look, shake the tree, there are ripe dates there, [to] provide you with food. Look, there's a stream here to provide you with water."

The only thing that God asked of her that day was that she simply not speak to anyone. And so she has her baby, is cared for in this very tender relationship with God, and once the baby is born, then she goes back to her family. [Her] family, not surprisingly, is not very happy. "Where'd this baby come from? What have you been doing? Mary, daughter of Aaron, your father was not an evil man. Your mother was not unchaste. What has happened here?"

So she's not allowed to talk to anybody that day. So who speaks up to defend her? The Infant Jesus. One of his miracles in the Qur'an, is to speak as an infant, and he speaks up to defend his mother, to defend a woman who has been falsely accused of unchastity.

What do Muslims believe about Jesus? They believe that Jesus was a Word from God and a Spirit from God, but not the Son of God. This is probably one of the biggest differences between Islam and Christianity. For Muslims, the understanding of God is that God is completely separate from human beings. And so the idea of God having a son, which always seems to be interpreted literally, that's not something that God would do, because God is not human like us.

Muslims also do not believe in the Crucifixion, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus, which was certainly pivotal to Christianity. And the reason for that goes back to that discussion of individual accountability. If we are not collectively responsible for the sins of other people, then it would not be possible for one individual to engage in one all-atoning sacrifice to save all of humanity. Each one of us ends up being responsible for our own actions. Islamic tradition teaches that when God goes to judge you in the afterlife, your good deeds will be weighed against your bad deeds. If your good deeds are heavier, you'll go to Paradise. If your bad deeds are heavier, then it's unfortunate for you, you will end up in Hell.

So what exactly do they do with the whole Crucifixion, Death, Resurrection thing, with respect to Jesus? The exegetes, those who interpret Scripture, have two different interpretations of one verse. This verse says that God raised Jesus up. Some understand that to be a reference to the Ascension: that God literally raised Jesus up into heaven, so that he did not die. Others said, well, this raising up is really more symbolic, more metaphorical.

Crucifixion was a horrible way to die. It was a painful and humiliating way to die. And it would be unthinkable for God to allow one of his precious messengers to die in such a gruesome, unacceptable way. And so the idea of God raising him up would be raising him above that kind of death. And so the explanation is typically that it wasn't Jesus who died. It was somebody else who looked like him. But that Jesus himself was not crucified.

Where might this leave us with respect to interfaith dialogue and relations? Because I realize I'm running out of time. I have so much to say, and never enough time to say it all. I think that one of the things Muslims and Christians really need to think seriously about is, what kind of dialogue or relationship are we looking for? Are we looking for one in which we

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can cooperate? Or are we looking for one in which we simply argue about whose religion is better than whose, and the kinds of conflict that that can lead to?

I'd like to suggest that there are two major avenues that dialogue is taking today. One of them is what I would call a dialogue of information and perspectives. Certainly, with respect to Islam, there is a lot of misinformation out there in the media. I was shocked on one of my first trips to Saudi Arabia to discover that there's just as much misinformation out there about Christianity.

One of my first meetings with three very, very conservative religious scholars—I was fully veiled, my husband was with me, so I'd done everything protocol-wise that I was supposed to do—but they were sitting back against the wall, in absolute terrors. What have I done or what am I not doing that I need to do to help these folks relax?

And they said, "Well, it's just we've never met a cannibal before." I said, "Excuse me? Did I use the wrong word?" I thought I said Christian. "No, no, no. We understand, but don't you people eat your God every Sunday?" Well, okay, we don't really quite think of it in those terms, but there was a real fear factor for them, that I just had never thought about it that way before. So hearing these differences of perspectives and making sure that there's accurate information and understandings out there can be helpful.

Dialogue can also help us to avoid the kind of reductionism into 30-second sound bites that the media likes. And it's one thing to read a book or hear somebody on TV talking about a faith tradition. It's entirely different when you have the opportunity to meet a person yourself, and hear them talk directly about their own experiences of the divine and what their faith tradition means to them.

And so I'm very proud that Boston College is part of this kind of dialogue. Many thanks to the chair of our Theology Department, Catherine Cornille, for working very hard to ensure that this kind of dialogue continues. Now, we have the School of Theology and Ministry also working, hopefully, to help us with this kind of information.

Some people feel that dialogue in and of itself doesn't go quite far enough. They would like for dialogue to have a more practical focus. It's nice for us to get together and talk about doctrine and talk about what we believe, but what are we going to do with it? And so this kind of dialogue is really much more directed toward, how do we engage together in dealing with social injustice? In dealing with community level issues? How do we take this first stage of dialogue and build on it so that we're actually building relationships with each other that fulfill needs for all of us.

Will you all bear with me for one song at the end? It kind of wraps it all up, with respect to what Muslims believe. This is a young man named Sami Yusuf. A piece that he wrote to express some of the names of God and what they mean to Muslims around the world.