



***A Glimpse
at Islamic
Beliefs***

***With a Brief
Preview of
Christianity in
Pre-Islamic Times***

Introduction

Do you know that:

- Islam is one of the fastest growing religions in the world today?
- 15% of all the immigrants who come to the US are Muslims?
- These immigrants come from over sixty Islamic countries or countries with large communities of Muslims?
- Over four million Muslims reside in the US?
- There are 1.2 billion Muslims worldwide and only one missionary for every one million Muslims?
- Muslims are mission-minded and intend to convert the US and the Western world to Islam?
- Jesus died for Muslims too, and they need to accept Him as their personal Savior?

I believe that God has brought our Muslim friends to this country and other western nations for a reason. Since Islamic countries do not allow Christians to reach out to their Muslim neighbors without the penalty of persecution, God has brought them to our backyard to hear the Word of God without fear or persecution. As a Christian, do you see yourself carrying the Light to the lives of Muslims whom Jesus loves and longs to save? If the Holy Spirit talked to your heart about this mission, ask Him to give you the vision, understanding, love, and zeal to reach out to our Muslim brothers and sisters.

Christianity in Pre-Islamic Times

Most scholars call the pre-Islamic time “The Age of Ignorance”. The term originated from the concept of religious ignorance; but as we examine the religious life in Arabia on the eve of the rise of Islam, it becomes apparent that the Arabs were not isolated from the rest of the ancient world and its civilizations. The sedentary as well as the tribal life of the Arabs in both the Southern and Northern regions of Arabia were exposed to the religions and cultures of the neighboring countries, especially in Yemen. Archeology has proved that Yemen had enjoyed a high standard of civilization and that Christianity and Judaism dominated the life of its residents before Islam. Yemen was filled with monasteries, churches and monks. After the collapse of the Dam of Ma’rib, many of its tribes immigrated to the northern regions, carrying with them their Christianity.

It is appropriate here to hint at the different religions that existed in Arabia before Islam, without elaborating or even examining them. These religions were:

1. Judaism
2. Hanifism
3. Polytheism
4. Zoroastrianism
5. Christian heresies
6. Christianity

But, since the purpose of this study is to discuss Christianity in Arabia before and on the eve of the advent of Muhammad, we will focus on three regions of Arabia in particular: Mecca, Medina and Najd.

In his book, *Islam and the Oriental Churches*, William Shedd alludes that "Christianity entered Arabia from three distinct geographical sources" (p.12). **The first** was Palestine and Syria; **the second** was Mesopotamia and Babylonia. From these two regions Christian influence had dominated almost all of Northern Arabia "from the Red Sea to the Persian Gulf" (ibid. 13).

The third source was Africa, especially Abyssinia with whom the Himyarite Christians in Yemen allied themselves (ibid. 18-19).

Mecca

Mecca was a commercial, religious and cultural center, highly respected by the Arabs. Caravans from Syria, Iraq, Yemen, China, and Persia came to trade with the Meccans. At the same time, Meccan merchants were accustomed to going to Syria for trading at least twice a year. Thus Mecca was vibrant with life and activities and merchants from everyway of life carried with them, besides their goods, their civilizations, religions and cultures. Islamic sources recount many trips Muhammad made to Syria with his uncle Abu Talib as well as after he was employed by Khadija, who later became his first wife. During these trips, it was said that he encountered Christian monks and other Christians. When his followers were persecuted in Mecca, he sent them

to the Christian Abyssinian king to find refuge in his country. Trade, however, was only one means of communication between Arabia and the outside world. Christian missionaries, Nestorians or Monophysites contributed significantly to spreading the religion of Christ in Arabia, as well as Mecca, Medina and other parts of Arabia.

It is believed that some of Jesus' disciples, such as Matthew and Thomas, had preached the Gospel among the Arab quarters in different regions of Arabia and Hijaz. The scholar Yusuf al-Sim'ani quoted a large number of the Greek, Syriac and Arab authors attesting to the zeal of these disciples to witness to the Arabs about the Gospel of Christ. Also, the great Arab historian Ibn Khaldun denotes in his *History* that Bartholomew made missionary trips to the land of the Arabs and Hijaz.

Since Mecca was in existence before Christ and revered by the Arabs who continued to make the pilgrimage to the Ka'ba, undoubtedly these disciples paid great attention to this city, which later became the birthplace of Muhammad. Arab historians like Ibn al-Athir, Ibn Khaldun and Abu al-Fida' recorded that the sixth king of the tribe of Jarham was called Abdul-Masih Ibn Baqiah Ibn Jarham (The Slave of Christ, Son of Baqiyah, Son of Jarham). A famous Islamic author, Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani (897-966 A.D.), indicates that during the reign of this king the Ka'ba was under the authority of an Episcopal (Al-Aghani 13:109). In his *Ak-hbar Mecca* (The Episodes of Mecca), the Islamic

chronicler al-Azraqi remarks that the pillars of the Ka'ba were designed with pictures of the prophets, among them the images of Jesus and Mary (ed. Wustinfeld, 110-112).

In his *History*, al-Ya'qubi (Leiden ed. 1:298) says, "Those who became Christians from among the quarters of the Arabs were peoples from Quraish from Banu Asad Bin 'Abdul-Izza, among them Uthman bin al-Huwayrith bin Asad and Waraqa bin Nawfal." Some scholars regard Waraqa as the Bishop of Mecca during the early life of Muhammad. He was also the cousin of Muhammad's wife Khadija and presided over her wedding. Al-Azraqi also states that a Christian cemetery was behind the Maqla' on the road of the well of 'Anbasa in Thi Tawa (p. 501). The Maqla' is the mountain that is down from Mecca at the right hand of whoever is leaving (Mecca) on his way to Medina (Yathrib).

Sheikho provides us with a list of Christians who resided in Mecca, who were well known among the residents of the city (*Al-Nasraniyah wa Adabuha Bayna 'Arab al-Jahiliya*, p. 120). Moreover, it is recorded in the *Book of Al-Kharaj* (ed. Th. Juynboll, 1896, p.53) that "The messenger of God...imposed on every Christian in Mecca one dinar every year." This implies that there were a number of Christians who dwelt in Mecca during the time of Muhammad.

Medina (Yathrib)

The existence of Christians in Medina before Islam is not a matter of discussion anymore. Wellhausen claims that Medina was inhabited by Jews and Christians under the authority of Aramaic religious leaders (*Das Arabish Reich und Sein*, Strurz, p.4). H. Herenboug states that Christianity had various followers in the Arab Peninsula. Both the Ghassanid and the Lakhmid kingdoms dominated its northern border, while its central and southern regions were controlled by Yemenite episcopates (*Opuscules d'un Arabisant*, p. 16).

When Muhammad passed away, his poet Hassan bin Thabit eulogized him:

The Nasara (Christians) of Yathrib and its Jews
rejoiced when (Muhammad) was buried
in a dug grave.

It is obvious here that the poet was talking about the Christians and Jews who lived in Yathrib.

In the ancient Calendar of the Caldanian Church, which was published by the priest Butros 'Aziz in 1909 (p.8), it was recorded that the Nestorians had assigned a Metropolitan to Yathrib in which three churches were established. They were called The Church of Ibrahim al-Khalil, The Church of Ayyub the Righteous and The Church of Musa al-Kalim. This

account may be suspicious, yet other historical hints attest that Christianity existed in Yathrib from the early Christian centuries. The Islamic historian Ibn Abu Jarir al-Tabari quotes a tradition on the authority of the people of Yathrib that there was on the Mount of Aqiq a grave for one of Jesus' disciples in the neighborhood of their city (1:737-738). These traditions may be questionable, but some scholars, on the basis of some documents, claim that among the two major Arab tribes who inhabited Yathrib were Christians by the evidence that one of the leaders of the tribe of Aws was called Abu 'Umar al-Rahib (Abu Umar the Monk) (refer to Sirat Ibn Hisham, 561-562).

Najd

A number of tribes embraced Christianity, such as Tay', Sukun, Sakasik, Kinda, etc. In addition to that, there were a number of monasteries such as the Monastery of Sa'd and the Monastery of Umru on the mountain of Tay'.

In part two of his book, Sheikho examines the Christian terminologies and the "vocabularies" that were in vogue among the Arab tribes, their churches, monasteries, feasts, and various other aspects of the Christian religion that were familiar to the Arabs in general and their poets in particular. Unfortunately space does not permit us to discuss the many facets of Christianity in the pre-Islamic time.

It is worthwhile, lastly, to allude that the terms “Christian” and “Christianity” were unknown to the Arabs. Instead, they used the terms “Nasara” and “Nasraniya”. The origin of this term is very controversial. Only in the 15th Century, during the reign of the Ottoman Empire, did the terms “Christian” and “Christianity” become known among Muslims.

Christian Arab Tribes In Pre-Islamic Times

The following is a list of the Arab tribes that embraced Christianity partially or as a whole:

- Al-Azd
- Amru' al Qays (children of Ban' Amru' al-Qays from the Tribe of Tammim)
- Al-Aws
- Bakr
- Balli – a branch of Qada'a
- Bahra' – a branch of Qada'a
- Taghlib
- Tammim
- Tannukh
- Tha'laba – three branches of Tay'
- Jutham
- Jarm – from the tribes of Qada'a
- Jarham
- Al-Hadda' wa al-Simt – branches from bani Amru' al-Qays
- Al-Harith bin Qa'b
- Himyar
- Hanifa
- Al-Khazraj

- Rabi'a – includes seven other tribes that were majority Christian
- Al-Sakasik and Al-Sakun
- Salih – a branch of the Tribe of Ghassan
- Shayban – branch of the Tribe of Bakr
- Dubai'a
- Tay'
- 'Amila
- Al-'Ibbad – the inhabitants of al-Hira
- 'Abd al-Dar – a branch of Lakhm, lived for a period in Mecca
- 'Abd al-Qays – a tribe of Rabi'a
- 'Ijl – a large tribe from Bakr
- 'Uqayl – branch of Ghatfan
- Ghassan
- Farasam – from the Tribe of Taghlib
- Quraysh
- Quda'a – it is believed that the entire tribe embraced Christianity
- Al-Qayn
- Kalb
- Kinda
- Lakham

- Mazin
- Mathhaj
- Ma'ad – Syriac chronicles mentioned and listed the Christians of Ma'ad and their episcopals
- Mahara
- Najja
- Al-Nakha' from Najran
- Al-Narm bin Qasit – a branch of Rabi'a
Yashkur – branch of the Tribe of Bakr

The Trinity

Islam is the faith of 1.2 billion Muslims worldwide. It is a monotheistic religion since Muslims believe in one God Who created the world from nothing. But the God of Islam who is called Allah is not, in his nature, the same God of Christianity. The basic difference between Allah of Islam and God of Christianity is the concept of the Trinity. The Trinity is rejected by Islam and regarded as blasphemy. It is difficult, if not impossible, for a Muslim to understand how Christians believe in a Triune God. To them, to believe in the Trinity means to believe in three Gods. To associate any god with God is an unforgivable sin in Islam. Though in the Qur'an Christians are called *the People of the Book*, yet they are destined to go to hell because of their belief in the Trinity. They are polytheists and infidels. It is interesting however, in the context of speaking about Jesus, that the Qur'an says: **"The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, is only the apostle of Allah and His Word which He committed to Mary and a Spirit from Him."** (Chapter 4:169). In this Qur'anic text the three persons of the Trinity are already mentioned: Allah, Who is the Father in Christianity; His Word, Who is Jesus the Logos; and the Spirit of God, Who is the Holy Spirit. Three Persons in One. Despite this, Muslims are not ready to accept this interpretation of the Qur'anic text.

Fatherhood of God

Islam objects to the concept of the fatherhood of God. God is the Creator. The concept of a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ is foreign to Islam. A quick study of the 99 most beautiful names of God or His attributes does not reveal the existence of such relationship. Within the Islamic context man is the slave of God. The Qur'an indicates that, **"The Messiah does not disdain to be the slave of God."** (Chapter 4:172). This is contrary to the biblical teaching. Our faith in Jesus Christ, and being saved by His blood entitles us to be called the children of God in a spiritual sense. When we talk about the fatherhood of God, a Muslim inclines to interpret it as a physical relationship. It is very important to clarify this point of view to our Muslim friends. It is true that God is the Creator and much more. We even agree with our Muslim friends on most of God's attributes mentioned in Islam. But God, Who created us in His image, loves us, not because of our goodness, but because of His mercy. Because of His image in us, which belongs to Him only. Jesus on the cross restored the purity of that image which we distorted with our sins and brought us back to a right relationship with God. This is why we call Him our Father. Most importantly, Jesus taught us to call God our heavenly Father.

Deity of Christ

Muslims do not believe in the deity of Jesus Christ. Jesus is just a prophet like any other prophet. He is one of the five major prophets of Islam: Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. As a prophet He is the slave of God. When we talk about Christ's sonship to God, Muslims understand it in a physiological sense. **In chapter 6:101**, which talks about God, Jesus and Mary, the Qur'an states, "**How could he have a son when He has no consort?**" Also, "**He – exalted be the majesty of the Lord – has not taken a consort or a son.**" (**Chapter 72:2**). It is evident from these texts that neither the Qur'an nor Muslims comprehend that when we call Jesus the Son of God we are not talking here about a physical relationship. Jesus is the Son of God because He was born of the Holy Spirit and He is the Word of God. No one else was born of the Holy Spirit. It is very interesting to note that one of Jesus' titles in Islamic literature is the **Spirit of God**, and in some cases **Word of God**. These titles have never been bestowed in Islam on any other prophet. Muslims also claim that Jesus did not perform His miracles by His own power but by the leave of God.

The Holy Spirit

The term "Holy Spirit" is mentioned in the Qur'an in several places, but the Qur'anic "Holy Spirit" is not the same as the Biblical "Holy Spirit". Muslims believe that the Holy Spirit is the archangel Gabriel, the bearer of the revelation. Gabriel is also called the Faithful Spirit. His main function in the Qur'an was to convey to Muhammad the Qur'anic text as it was recorded in Arabic in the Preserved Tablet or the Mother of the Book from eternity. Also, in many cases, Gabriel carried to Muhammad some messages from God, either to correct a verdict he issued or to encourage him in time of stress. Thus, the concept of the Holy Spirit in Islam is not the same as in Christianity. As Christians, we believe that the Holy Spirit is One of the Trinity and He is active today in the life of Christians as individuals as well as in the life of the church. It is true that the Holy Spirit reveals to us the will of the Father. He guides, encourages, rebukes, empowers, and teaches us. He is the Comforter promised by Jesus. He is a Person, divine and eternal. He is not the archangel Gabriel.

Virgin Birth of Jesus

It is interesting that Muslims believe in the virgin birth of Jesus Christ. There are many similarities between the Biblical story and the Qur'anic account about the early life of Jesus, but there are also many basic differences. Comparative studies show that the Qur'anic account is taken from apocryphal books such as *The Gospel of Infancy* which was translated from Coptic language into Arabic which was in vogue in Egypt and Arabia during the time of Muhammad; also *The Gospel of Thomas the Israelite*, *The Protevangelium of James*, *The Gospel of Nicodemus* which is called *Gesta Pelati*, and *The Narrative of Joseph the Arimathea*. Scholars believe that Muhammad heard the story from Maria the Copt, his Egyptian concubine. The similarities between the Qur'anic text and the Egyptian account are very striking. Though the Qur'an emphasizes the virgin birth of Christ, that does not make Jesus divine in the Islamic faith. They argue that the creation of Adam was more miraculous than the birth of Jesus, because Adam was created without a father or a mother, while Jesus had a mother at least. What they do not realize is that Jesus is not divine because of His virgin birth, but He is divine because He was born of the Holy Spirit and He is the eternal Word of God. Also, what makes the gospel story authentic is that the birth of Jesus, with all its detail, is the fulfillment of the prophecies of the Old Testament, while the Qur'anic account lacks that documentation.

Second Coming of Christ

Do you know that Muslims are awaiting the Second Coming of Christ? They believe that one of the signs of the end times is the Second Coming of Christ. Though the Qur'an does not provide any details about the events of Christ's Second Coming, the Islamic Tradition, which is regarded by Muslims as the second authority in Islam, provides us with more information concerning this event. Muslims affirm that Jesus is going to come back at a certain time to fill the earth with goodness and righteousness. He is going to kill the Anti-Christ supported by His faithful followers, the Muslims. He will proclaim that Islam is the true religion of God and command Christians and Jews to embrace the Islamic faith. They also believe that Jesus, when He is forty years old, will get married and have children. Sometime during His lifetime He is going to visit the city of Medina in Saudi Arabia to greet His "brother Muhammad" and later, when He dies, He will be buried in a tomb next to Muhammad. Muslims will conduct His funeral and bid Him their respect. Jesus will be resurrected in the Day of Judgment like the rest of mankind. It is evident that Muslims do not believe that Jesus is coming to judge the dead and the living. They do not believe that every knee shall bow down in front of Him and crown Him Lord of Lords. To them Jesus is only a prophet.

The Fallen Nature of Man

One of the major differences between Christianity and Islam is the concept of the fallen nature of Man. Muslims believe that Man is born innocent. They trace that concept to the time of Adam. The Qur'anic record of the story of Adam and Eve's disobedience is similar to the Biblical account. The difference lies in the consequences. The Qur'anic text reports that God expelled Adam and Eve from Paradise because of their disobedience; however, Adam and Eve repented and God accepted their repentance. That was the end of the story. Muslims do not believe that a drastic change has occurred to the human nature. They do not understand how Adam's sin could be inherited and that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. They say that repentance accompanied by the mercy of God is enough for salvation. There is no need for a Redeemer to pay the ransom price for our sins. The whole idea behind Muslims' attitude toward the concept of the fallen nature of Man is to deny both the crucifixion of Jesus and the need for His shed blood for remission of sin.

The Crucifixion of Christ

Islam conclusively denies the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. The basis of their denial is a solitary undocumented verse in the Qur'an (Chapter 4:156). Though this verse is subject to various interpretations, Muslims assert that the crucifixion of Jesus did not take place and that the story of Christ's death and crucifixion is the innovation of the early Christians. Muslims believe that when Jesus was surrounded by His enemies who intended to crucify Him, God performed two miracles: First, He lifted Jesus up to Heaven and saved Him from His adversaries and second, God cast Jesus' image on one of the attackers, most probably Judas Iscariot, who was then mistakenly crucified instead of Jesus. Actually there are several different stories about the identity of the fake Jesus. On the other hand, there are Muslim scholars who believe that Jesus died a natural death but was not crucified, seeking to reconcile the above-mentioned verse with other verses that indicate that Jesus did die. Unfortunately, Muslims do not go to the genuine source of the crucifixion and do not see the need for the Redeemer.

Inspiration of Scripture

The concept of inspiration in Islam differs drastically from the Christian concept. First, Muslims believe that the archangel Gabriel revealed the Qur'an word for word in Arabic. There are ten verses in the Qur'an that stress that the Qur'an is revealed specifically in eloquent Arabic for the people of Mecca and its surrounding area. Moreover they believe that the Qur'an existed from eternity in what they call the *Preserved Tablet* or the *Mother of the Book*. Such declaration implies that only the Arabic version is called the Qur'an. Any other version in any other language is not the Qur'an, it is only an interpretation of the Qur'an or the meaning of the Qur'an or a translation of the Qur'an. Second, that the Qur'anic text and style are not Muhammad's but God's. Third, that Muhammad was only relating what was revealed to him word for word. Fourth, all other scriptures are corrupted and only the Qur'an is the true word of God. The Muslims are ready to accept anything from the Bible as long as it does not contradict the Qur'an.

Repentance & Redemption

Islam is legalistic in its nature. In order to obtain God's favor and forgiveness, Muslims have to perform certain duties and rituals. The Five Pillars and good deeds are essential in Islam. They are not the fruits of faith, but are the means or the way for salvation, contrary to Christianity, which emphasizes that our salvation is not the result of our effort. It is by way of the cross we are saved. Our salvation is a gift from God. An act of love. Repentance alone does not provide us with salvation. A repentant criminal is not entitled to freedom or for his penalty to be removed, he has to suffer for the crime he committed. This is the law. The wages of sin is death. Spiritual death. This is God's penalty inflicted on the sinful man. This is why Jesus came to earth. He came to redeem us and to take on Himself the penalty of our sins. There is no legalism in Christianity but faith. Good deeds are the fruits of our faith. We cannot be Christians without giving forth good fruits. Due to our new nature as Christians, we have to produce good deeds. They are not the means to salvation, but the result of it. In Islam, however, there is no assurance of salvation. The fate of a Muslim depends on God's mercy and his/her good deeds.

Conclusion

Two observations we have to keep in mind as we attempt to discover the differences and similarities between Christianity and Islam:

First, although both Christians and Muslims may be using the same terminology, they have very different concepts and meanings for these terms. This fact is very misleading since it gives the impression that both religions embrace the same doctrines.

Second, Islamic major doctrines peremptory contradict all the main Christian tenets, especially those that are related to the person of Christ. Muslims' world-view is drastically different than the Christian world-view. Their denial of the divinity of Jesus, His crucifixion and His resurrection show Islam's rejection of Christ's act of redemption.

We have to realize that we cannot change their hearts, attitudes and views of Christ. That is the work of the Holy Spirit. All we can do is witness, pray, serve, and love them.