

Do Muslims and Christians speak the same language?

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The first time I heard it I was a bit stunned. My friend, Blama (a West African form of the name Ibrahima) held out his hands, face down. He extended both index fingers straight out, held them firmly pressed together side-by-side and stated, "The Muslim and the Christian are like this. No difference." Here I had been trying to convince him that the two religions were very different and now he was telling me that we were the same. I was doing my best to point out the dissimilarities between our Scriptures, our God, our prophets and how we ought to live. Apparently, Blama saw things differently than I!

The purpose of this writing is to explore Islam and Christianity, but with the underlying premise that words used by both are not the same. It is the hope that by the final word, the reader will begin to grasp the tremendous complexity of the words of both religions and that the reader will not blithely use words which are not communicating the truth of the gospel of `Isa Al-Masih.

Words Have Meaning

The premise is quite simple. Words have meaning. The words being written for the reader to peruse are really nothing more than vehicles for meaning. Physical symbols of `g', `o', and `d', when properly combined produce visual representations of meaning.

I am sure we can all agree that words have meaning. When we use a word, we do so because we have agreed between us that it has a specific meaning. For instance, if one wishes to communicate `plate', the word `frivolous' is not used. Likewise, if one desires to communicate a more transcendent idea, such as the hope one has for success, one does not employ this phrase: "I really like your dress, Francine!"

To complicate such a simple notion, however, we can add the subject of comparative religion to the mix. Do not all religions speak about God, sin, good and evil? Because a Muslim and Christian use the same words, we must mean the same thing, correct? After all, we both believe that `God' is one, the creator, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent and totally unlike anything other being. We both agree that humans sin, that sin is bad because it is an act of rebellion against God. So, what is the problem?

Let me illustrate with a somewhat crude analogy. Sitting out in your front yard is a Ford and a Fiat. Let us make a list of similarities between the two:

- both are automobiles used for transportation;
- both words begin with `F' and have four letters;
- both use petroleum products;
- both might even be the same color.

If we simply employ the similarities of the objects, we could rightly say that it would appear the Ford and Fiat are the same. Perhaps we would focus on the one underlying characteristic of both: they are automobiles whose purpose is transportation. Surely, these similarities are overriding in our understanding of the Ford and Fiat? Not only are they similar in important ways, they are categorically the same! They are automobiles. Granted, a Ford salesman might tell you a Fiat is not an automobile, but who can trust a car salesman?!

But the question remains: Is a Ford the same as or similar to a Fiat? Are there differences?

- one is American made, the other Italian;
- one is automatic, the other has a stick shift;
- one is new, the other is old;
- one has four doors, the other two.

Sameness and Similarity

Based on these observations, is the Ford similar to or equivalent to the Fiat? If one uses only the first list, the list of comparison, the two cars can almost be made to be equivalent (the same). On the other hand, if the second list, the contrasting characteristics, is used in addition to the first, the only conclusion possible is that the two cars are simply similar. That is, they share commonalities and similarities, but they are not the same or equivalent.

For clarity, let us distinguish between the idea of `sameness' and `similarity'. First, let me offer this stipulative definition for sameness: any two items, persons or ideas are equivalent in every characteristic and attribute. Philosophically we are speaking of strict identity. An underlying assumption which feeds into this notion of sameness is that change exists. Sameness allows for no change or alteration. For purposes of this discussion, Muslims and Christians agree that very little changes. In fact, we might agree that God is the only being not subject to change. But this refers to his character and attributes, not to our understanding of God. More on this later.

Similarity is not sameness. Similarity is a flexible, fluctuating, pliable concept. Sameness is firm, unbreakable, absolute. Two things, persons or ideas may share any number of similarities. That they are partners in similarity, by definition, makes them not the same. Sameness and similarity are mutually exclusive concepts.

The Ford and the Fiat are similar. The fact of their similarity proves they cannot be the same. If the Ford and Fiat were indeed the very same car (but perhaps called different names by various people), we could not say they are similar. I am reminded of my own children and their struggles with the English language. Many times one of them will say something such as "That place is like a store." What is being described is a store. If it is like (similar to) a store, it cannot be a store. It might be an office building, a house, a bank or a garage, but it cannot be a store. So, I gently correct the statement, "It cannot be like a store if it is a store." Six year olds do not yet understand the formal equivalence of `is'.

Second, the definition of similar: two or more items, persons or ideas which may have at least one characteristic held in common. Obviously, then, the greater the number of characteristics and attributes held in common, the greater the similarity. The characteristics of commonality may be endless, but if there is one characteristic which is not equivalent, the two cannot be called the same.

Similarity works on a sliding scale of contrasting and comparing. We can say `x' is very much like `y' or we may say `z' is very little like `y'. Both statements deal with similarity. Sameness is identity. There is no sliding scale of comparison. Either the items, persons or ideas are equal, equivalent, and identical or they are not.

It would appear that many times, Muslims (and Christians) have committed this type of error. This error is known as the fallacy of equivocation (equating two or more concepts which are not the same though

they may be similar). Words which have similar meanings (that is, they share commonalities) are made to be equivalent. Muslims say 'car' meaning Ford while Christians think Fiat! Muslims say "Allah" and think this is the God of the Bible.

Do Muslims Words Have Christian Meanings?

It is assumed the reader is Christian (though I am sure there are Muslims who will also find this). For this reason, it is assumed the reader has a Christian understanding of God, his attributes, his character and his revelation. Therefore, we will not attempt to define or list the characteristics of Yahweh, but only the character and attributes of Allah will be investigated. Let the reader decide if the words mean the same or are only similar. If the words are similar, what is the degree of similarity?

Allah

1)

The case for sameness

Muslims and Christians agree that the Almighty is One. There is agreement that he is the creator of all things. He is omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent. Without listing the 99 names of Allah, it is generally held by Christians that most of these names can find their counterparts in the Bible. While there is much we know about Allah, there is a greater storehouse of knowledge we do not know. The Almighty is totally other, yet is said to be nearer than a man's jugular vein (Qur'an 50:16).

Allah reveals his will to mankind in a book given through prophets. He calls for obedience to his will. He punishes evil and rewards good. He forgives, shows mercy and compassion, yet he displays his anger and wrath as well.

Allah is self-existent, to be worshiped, hears and answers prayers, sustains the universe, free of all wants and needs, irresistible, the light of the heavens, Lord of the dawn, et al.

What Christian could object to these qualities also existing in the Yahweh? In fact, both Allah and Yahweh are categorically identical: the One, true, Creator, Sustaining Almighty God who rules the universe. The question remains: Are they similar or identical?

2)

The case for similarity

Ask a Muslim if the Almighty would deign to become a human being.⁽¹⁾

Ask if the Almighty can be known as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.⁽²⁾

Ask if the Qur'an reveals the Almighty's character or only his will.⁽³⁾

Ask if the Almighty can allow people to lie in certain circumstances.⁽⁴⁾

Ask if the Almighty has compassion on those going to hell.⁽⁵⁾

Ask if the Almighty has a knowable essence.⁽⁶⁾

Conclusion

It is hoped the reader has begun to grapple with the complexity of the situation. The Muslim-Christian

debate can only benefit as both sides think, speak and write clearly. Our words must accurately reflect the understanding derived from our own Scriptures. Words do have meaning and therefore, they must be used appropriately. In the Muslim-Christian debate there are certain words (viz., `God', `Allah' and `Yahweh') which share commonalities. Too often, in a naive attempt to foster dialogue, we make these commonalities the pinnacle of our discussion. The words used by Muslim and Christian do not necessarily have the same meaning. When it is stated that Allah = Yahweh = Brahman = Allah, this is more than oversight. It shows a lack of understanding of the meaning or content of the words.

There are words and concepts which bear scrutiny with which this paper has not dealt. I have only presented a sketchy beginning for this process. It is hoped this introduction will prompt others to examine words, how they are used in Islam and Christianity, and the meanings behind those words.⁽⁷⁾ Never let it be said "We are arguing semantics." This is a `poor man's argument' which is generally used as a smokescreen or red herring to draw attention away from the fact of the matter: semantics, meaning and words are important.

It behooves us to use words carefully and thoughtfully. We must not be guilty of assuming that when the Muslim says Allah he is speaking of Divinity with all the characteristics, attributes and essence of Yahweh. To do so is to be guilty of the fallacy of equivocation. We do not want equivocation to become our avocation.

End Notes

1. Kenneth Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret*, p. 291: "To conceive of God in Christ is for the Muslim mind an unworthy thing. God does not become man. If He did, something unthinkable would have happened to His Divinity. Muslims have resisted the Christian interpretation of Christ on these grounds in the belief that they are safeguarding the Divine majesty."

The Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din, *The Ideal Prophet*, pp. 5, 6: "Where then arises the necessity of having a God-in-man placed before us as our ideal? The whole scheme, if any, would seem irrelevant.

2. Qur'an 4:171: (Far exalted is He) above having a son.
3. Cragg, p. 47: "The revelation [in the Qur'an] is conceived of, not as a communication of the Divine Being, but only of the Divine will. It is a revelation, that is, of law, not personality. God the revealer remains Himself unrevealed.

Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, p. 37: "The Qur'an is primarily a book of religious and moral principles and exhortations ..."

4. *Mishkat ul-Masabih*, translated by Karim, vol. i, p. 467: "Asma'a-bn-Yezid reported that the Messenger of Allah said: Falsehood is not lawful except in three (things): falsehood of a man to his wife to please her, falsehood in war, and falsehood in restoring peace among men. - Ahmad and Tirmidhi"
5. *Mishkat*, v. iii, p. 117: "Abu Darda reported that the Holy Prophet said: Allah created Adam when he created him (sic). Then He stroke (sic) his right shoulder and took out a white race as if they were seeds, and He stroke (sic) his left shoulder and took out a black race as if they were coals. Then He said to those who were in his right side: Towards paradise and I don't care. He said to those who were on his left shoulder: Towards Hell and I don't care. - Ahmad"

This hadith seems racist in its report of creation. All Muslims know that the right hand is the hand for eating and greeting. The left is for `other' matters. The right shoulder of Adam saw the white folks emerge. The black folks came from his left. The white race is called `seeds'. Seeds grow and produce. The black race is compared to coals which are used to produce heat by burning. This is juxtaposed to those going to heaven and hell where they will either flourish or burn. It is difficult to resist the impression that Allah appears to be a racist.

6. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, p. 18: "... the Divine essence (al-dhat) remains absolutely transcendent and no religion has emphasized the transcendent aspect of God more than Islam."

Norman L. Geisler & Abdul Saleeb, *Answering Islam*, p. 136: "... [in] traditional Islam, properly speaking, God does not have an essence, at least not a knowable one. Rather, he is Will. ... The orthodox Islamic view of God claims ... that God is an absolutely necessary being. He is self-existent, and he cannot not exist. But if God is by nature a necessary kind of being, then it is of his nature to exist. In short, he must have a nature or else he could not be by nature a necessary kind of being. In this same regard, orthodox Islam believes that there are other essential attributes of God, such as self-existence, uncreatedness, and eternity. But if these are all essential characteristics of God, then God must have an essence, otherwise they would not be essential attributes. For this is precisely how essence is defined, namely, as the essential attributes or characteristics of a being."

7. The following is an abbreviated list of suggested words: Jesus, Messiah, Lord, sin, forgiveness, righteousness, inspiration, and revelation.