

III. ISLAM & JEWS/CHRISTIANS

What Does the Qur'an Say about Jews and Christians?

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The news headlines make the task of understanding Islam's relationship to Judaism and Christianity a difficult one. From the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to the beheading of Christians by ISIS, most of the stories we encounter of Islam in the media involve either violence or terrorism. Due to the media's narrow framing of Islam, it's understandable why many in the West might conclude that Muslims are simply intolerant of their Abrahamic siblings. However, a brief survey of Islamic sources and history reveals a much more nuanced perspective on Islam's relationship with Judaism and Christianity.

Many Jews and Christians would be surprised to discover that the Qur'an has plenty of positive things to say about them. Jews and Christians possess a special status in the Qur'an as people to whom God revealed God's self in history.

Say, "We have believed in God and in what was revealed to us and what was revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the Descendants, and in what was given to Moses and Jesus and to the prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and we submit to Him" (Q. 3:84).

The Qur'an readily acknowledges that the God worshipped by Muslims is the same God that disclosed God's self to Jews and Christians and provided them with scriptures.

God has sent down upon you, [O Muhammad], the Book in truth, confirming what was before it. And he revealed the Torah and the Gospel (Q. 3:3).

The Qur'an holds Jews and Christians in high esteem precisely because God gave them scriptures that provided them with "guidance and light" (Q. 5:44). For this reason, the Qur'an often refers to Jews and Christians as "People of the Book" (*ahl al-kitab*).

An examination of the beliefs found in the Qur'an points to considerable common ground between the three traditions. All three express belief in the oneness of God. All three believe God established a special covenant with a particular community. All three uphold the importance of prayer, living according to God's will, and providing for the poor and those in need. Jews and Christians will also encounter a number of prophetic figures in the Qur'an that exist in their scriptures, including Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus.

At one point, the Qur'an opens the door to the possibility that Jews and Christians are a part of God's salvific plan.

Indeed, those who believed and those who were Jews or Christians or Sabeans – those who believed in God and the Last Day and did righteousness – will have their reward with their Lord, and no fear will there be concerning them, nor will they grieve (Q. 2:62).

However, not everything that the Qur'an has to say about Jews and Christians is positive. They are admonished for failing to follow God's original revelations.

If only the People of the Book had believed and feared God, we would have removed from them their misdeeds and admitted them to Gardens of Pleasure. If only they upheld the Torah, the Gospel, and what has been revealed to them from their Lord, they would have from above them and from beneath their feet (Q. 5:65-66).

While the Qur'an recognizes that God provided Jews and Christians with scriptures, it also maintains that these scriptures have become distorted over time and no longer provide the guidance needed to fulfill God's will. It is for this reason that God revealed the Qur'an to the Prophet Muhammad. It is the final, decisive revelation and provides all that is necessary for salvation. In this way, the Qur'an maintains that Islam supersedes Judaism and Christianity, similar to the way that the New Testament views God's revelation in Jesus Christ as superseding the covenant with the Jews.

The Qur'an rejects the notion that God most fully revealed God's self through a human being, Jesus. Jesus was a messenger of God but cannot be understood as God. Nor does the Qur'an accept that there are three manifestations or dimensions of the one divine being. This would be a violation of the oneness (*tawhid*) of God.

Although the Qur'an does critique Christianity and Judaism in some places, it also holds them in high esteem as "People of the Book." How has this translated historically, particularly in instances in which Jews and Christians were minorities in Islamic empires or nations?

The first point to note is that the general policy in Islamic empires in pre-modern history was not to force Jews and Christians to convert. The source of this policy is the Qur'an.

Let there be no compulsion in religion. Surely, Truth stands out clearly from error. Whoever rejects evil and believes in God has held the most trustworthy handhold that never breaks. And God is All-Hearing, All-Knowing (Q. 2:256).

Of course, plenty of Jews and Christians in Islamic empires did eventually convert, and there are instances of forced conversions, but Islam's primary emphasis when it comes to conversion is that one must accept Islam through free will.

Those Jews and Christians who did not convert were granted a special minority status within Islamic empires known as *dhimmis*. *Dhimmis* were given the freedom to practice their religion and to receive protection from Muslim rulers as long as they paid a special tax known as the *jizya*.

It should also be noted that Jews and Christians often found safe haven under Islamic rule. In parts of the medieval Byzantine and Persian empires, dissident Christians welcomed the advent of Muslim rule and enjoyed greater freedoms under Islam than under imperial Christianity. In medieval Muslim Spain, Jews and Christians held prominent positions in the caliph's court, serving as doctors, architects, and engineers. Several centuries later, after Christians had retaken Spain and expelled the Jews, many Jews found refuge in the Muslim lands of North Africa or in the Ottoman Empire.

At the same time, violent conflict is also a part of this history. The Crusades generated considerable bloodshed between Muslims and Christians. In modern history, European colonialism, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the war on terror have also left their mark on the relationship between

Muslims and their Abrahamic siblings, though many scholars recognize that these conflicts have been more about politics than theological differences.

This brief look at the history of Muslim-Jewish-Christian relations helps us better understand why it is incorrect to believe, as some do in the West, that Islam requires Muslims to hate Jews and Christians or to “kill infidels.” If Islam required Muslims to persecute or slaughter Jews and Christians, then both the Qur’an and much of Islamic history would make absolutely no sense. This doesn’t mean that some Muslim-majority countries have no room for improvement when it comes to granting these and other religious minorities greater freedoms. But it is clear that groups making a living off promulgating hatred toward Jews and Christians, groups such as al-Qaeda or ISIS, are at odds with the Qur’an and with the mainstream Islamic tradition.

Response to: What does the Qu'ran Say about Jews and Christians?

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What we say about each other matters. Sometimes, the most damaging comments and critiques come from those closest to us. Think about it. Those with whom you share things in common, have the most abiding connections – whether that be family, friends, church members, co-workers – are frequently those to whom we lodge the most harmful words and from whom we hear the same. The human propensity toward judgment rather than affiliation, difference rather than commonality, and assumption rather than conversation continues to foster ill will even among those who should know and have known the strongest relations. It seems that the more similarity, the stronger the ties, the quicker we are to suppose untruths, to evaluate too quickly, or to look for that which divides us rather than what unites us.

Christianity is not immune to such tendencies. From its earliest days, as evidenced even in the writings of the New Testament, those who followed Jesus had some rather unfavorable things to say about those with whom they shared ancestry. Repeatedly, however, these comments from the lips of Jesus himself are taken out of their literary and religious contexts. Our interpretation of these harsh words we read in the New Testament come from a place of presumed privilege, as if Christianity was an established religion over Judaism at the time the New Testament was written.

As Willie Jennings notes (Yale University), modern Christianity tends to forget that we were once the Gentiles. As Christianity starts to live into a reality of an established religion, it has to start defining its identity. And when we move into identity formation, we are prone to self-claims that are made over and against the other. Sometimes self-identity is for the sake of

survival. But all too often the protection of identity devolves into discrimination and decree.

When we look at what the Qur'an has to say about Jews and Christians, we are reminded, even convicted, of what we have to say about Muslims and what we have said about Jews. It should cause a moment of pause, of reflection, to ask from what place and for what reasons we say what we do. We are reminded that what we say matters and it is never from a place of objectivity. We are reminded that often these assumptions are made without tending the larger contexts, the bigger issues, and often in a vacuum so as to avoid real conversation and truthful dialogue.

III. Discussion Questions:

1. When you think about the fact that Muslims, Christians, and Jews all worship the same God, what difference does that make for who you understand God to be or how you might describe God's essential characteristics?
2. Considering the commonalities of all three religions – the oneness of God, that we all believe in a covenantal God, the importance of prayer, living according to God's will, and providing for the poor and those in need – how might these commonalities be a starting point for conversation rather than coercion?
3. Engage in honest reflection on and dialogue about both the positive and negative claims that Islam makes about Jews and Christians. Imagine how you might respond to these claims with Muslim neighbor and friend.
4. When have you been the object of misrepresentation? What was the situation and how did it make you feel? When have you found yourself judging others without adequate knowledge or appreciation of the circumstances? What were your motivations?