

Cross-Cultural Communication and the Dialogue of Disbeliefs

By Ali Darwish, PhD



Recently, foreign universities in the United Arab Emirates have taken up interest in the dialogue of religions and faiths in a country that virtually has no problem of religions and faiths. Conferences and seminars have been organized, speakers of various faiths have spoken and students have engaged in co-existential activities. One of these activities has produced a black T-shirt (see picture) carrying the statement: “I am Muslim and I love Jesus”, in a supposedly Muslim country where the majority of those who would read this statement, on the T-shirt worn by young students with low-cut jeans showing their butt cracks and tramp stamps, on and off campus. This T-shirt raises a serious question about the intentions of the producers or their level of awareness as regards the message they are putting out for their

intended audience, and begs the question: What is the fundamental, irreconcilable difference between Islam and Christianity?

The answer must be the status of Jesus and whether he is God or a prophet! Christianity is founded on the belief that Jesus is God, Son of God and Holy Spirit—the Holy Trinity, that is three manifestations of the same God or all three persons living in one divine being. Accordingly, God exists as three persons but is one God. Christianity is also founded on the belief that Jesus was crucified; he died on the cross and was resurrected. This is captured in St Paul’s letters: “I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:3-4).

In contrast, Islam unquestionably rejects this account of Jesus’ crucifixion, death and resurrection. The Quran affirms: [...] and because of their saying: We slew the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, Allah’s messenger - they slew him not nor crucified him, but it appeared so unto them; and lo! Those who disagree concerning him are in doubt thereof; they have no

knowledge thereof save pursuit of a conjecture; they slew him not for certain. (157) But Allah took him up unto Himself. Allah was ever Mighty, Wise (158).¹

Islam also rejects the belief that Jesus is the Son of God. The Quran again asserts: [...] Such was Jesus, son of Mary: (this is) a statement of the truth concerning which they doubt. (34) It befitteth not (the Majesty of) Allah that He should take unto Himself a son. Glory be to Him! When He decreeth a thing, He saith unto it only: Be! And it is. (35).²

The monotheistic version of God in Islam does not allow multiple manifestations of God or more than one person to live in a divine being. The Quran is clear on this: Say: He is Allah, the One! (1) Allah, the eternally Besought of all! (2) He begetteth not nor was begotten. (3) And there is none comparable unto Him. (4)³

The difference is therefore obvious only to those who know both religions. But for those who know only one side of the coin, the message on the black T-shirt fails to communicate the intended message. For an English-speaking Christian, the statement “I am Muslim and I love Jesus” tells the reader that Muslims love Jesus as Christians know Him—Jesus Christ, the Son of God. In other words, it implies that Muslims believe in the Christian Jesus or the Christian version of Jesus. So what’s the big fuss all about? While the writers of the statement meant to say to their Christian western counterparts that they love the same Jesus, there is a fundamental theological difference that while both Christianity and Islam refer to the same person, that same person stands for two different religious ideologies and two different accounts of his/His status and whether he/He was crucified and resurrected. If one side accepts the version of the other side, that side automatically abandons its version of Jesus and subsequently one negates or obviates the other. In other words, if Christianity accepts Islam’s version of Jesus as prophet and messenger like other prophets, Christianity no longer remains Christianity. Conversely, if Islam accepts Christianity’s version of Jesus as the Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, Islam no longer remains Islam. In this regard, Christianity and Islam at this level of theological difference are like matter and anti-matter. They cannot be reconciled.

While it is commendable that followers of various faiths seek to understand one another, to respect each other’s faith, and to show tolerance of other faiths and religions, giving the wrong message in the rush to show the others that Muslims are “open-minded”, “civilized”, “all-embracing” and “universal human beings”, can be counterproductive as it does not resolve the real differences or attempt to clarify why there are fundamental differences, and why such differences cause conflicts and wars.

In their haste to beautify the image of Islam and Muslims in the eyes of the West—an image that has been marred and tarred by Western media bias and prejudice and by the acts of terror committed by fringe Islamist groups, the producers of the T-shirt in question have failed to

communicate their intended message to the Western, Christian world—that is, Jesus is a prophet of Islam and Muslims love him. But even at this level of intentionality, what does the message really mean to the intended Western Christian? Apart from the distortion discussed above—nothing! Worse still: it portrays Muslims as placatory, apologetic hypocrites, who “utter with their mouths what is not in their hearts” [Quran]. “I am Muslim and I love Jesus!” Try this test: “I am Christian and I love Muhammad!” Jesus Christ! What’s going on?

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About the author

Ali Darwish is a technical communication, translation and knowledge management consultant with thirty years of experience. He has held positions in information technology, education, and knowledge transfer in the United Kingdom, the Middle East, and Australia. He has taught translation and interpreting theory and practice, discourse studies, and professional ethics at Australian universities for 14 years and has authored more than 25 books on translation, cross-cultural and technical communication and knowledge management.

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¹ Chapter An-Nisa, Pickthal’s English translation.

² Chapter Al-E-Imran. Ibid.

³ Chapter Al-Ikhlās. Ibid.