

Introduction

Not only Judaism in its several varieties, but hundreds of different sects of Christianity all maintain that their beliefs and practices are based on the Bible. If so many different religions can be justified by the Bible, why not Islam?

Most of Christianity recognizes the authority of the Bible, containing the Hebrew and Greek writings. There is some discussion of what writings to include and to what degree they are authoritative, but in principle Christians recognize the Bible. All forms of Judaism recognize the Torah and the other writings of the Tanach, which makes up the Old Testament of the Christian Bible. Islam appeals primarily to the Holy Qur'an, but in principle accepts the Bible. In practice, Muslims reject the Bible on the assumption that it is corrupted from the original in order to make it accommodate to Christian teaching.

The problem arises when we compare the beliefs and practices of any particular religious group with the book it appeals to. Inevitably there is much selectivity and interpretation, but beyond this remains the bare fact that the book is never the sole source of belief and practice. Where would the Christian year of festivals, the liturgy and a multitude of beliefs and practices be if all had to be founded on the Bible? Many of them would sadly fall by the wayside.

The decoupling of books from actual belief and practice first struck me a few years ago when I noticed how the books relate to the day of worship. The Hebrew Scriptures obviously maintain the observance of the Sabbath or seventh day of the week. Jewish tradition quite consistently puts this in practice. The observance of Sunday is characteristic of Christianity. But there is very little justification for this in the Greek Scriptures, the so-called New Testament.

On the contrary, the Sabbath is mentioned very often, sometimes quite favorably. I looked in the Qur'an to see how it dealt with the issue, and found that the Sabbath is maintained on a half-dozen occasions in the Qur'an as well. Friday prayer is also well established in the Qur'an, unlike Sunday in the New Testament, which can only be defended by doing violence to the text. But there is no Qur'anic justification for observing Friday as a special day from Thursday evening, as many Muslims do. We thus find the Sabbath to be a feature common to all of the sacred books. By contrast, the traditions vary on how they relate to the Sabbath, Judaism observing Saturday, Christianity Sunday, and Islam Friday.

By way of experiment I began to think how the Scriptures align themselves with the beliefs and practices of the various traditions. There might well be more features supporting Judaism in the Qur'an than mere reference to Saturday observance, and on the other hand, more features supporting Islam in the Bible than special recognition of Friday. Since Muslims generally do not know the Bible well, there is every reason to believe that they might be mistaken when they think the Bible supports Christianity. In sum, one question seems never to have been answered: how do Islamic belief and practice compare to the texts of Judaism and Christianity, that is, to the Bible?

I first came to the conclusion that the Bible might reflect Islamic features in unexpected ways through a reading of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5–7. A closer look at this text will reveal how the Bible can express Islamic values even on a structural level. This passage contains the texts which the greatest numbers of Christians know by heart.

Some Christian sects, notably those who have descended from the Anabaptists, seem to base the core of their doctrine on this passage alone. The Sermon on the Mount is beloved by Christian and non-Christian alike. The nonreligious person in Christian societies often appeals to its words. It is said that Gandhi based his practice of nonviolent resistance on it.

Since this is indisputably one of the most important texts of Christianity, we can only wonder how well it supports the basic beliefs of Christianity. Some of the most important beliefs of Christianity are these three: Christians believe that God is one God eternally existing in three persons, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Christians believe that the man Jesus is also in one and the same person at one and the same time completely and wholly God Almighty, one and equal with the Father.

Finally, Christians believe that salvation and correspondingly forgiveness of sins depend on the atoning sacrifice for sin made by Jesus in his death on the cross. By comparison, the well-known five pillars of Islamic practice are: testifying that there is no god but God; prayer, alms, fasting, and Pilgrimage.

The whole Sermon on the Mount implies time and again that there is only one being who is God, the one Jesus calls 'Our Father'. Because we live in a world of permissive child-rearing, we fail to notice immediately that the basic relationship referred to is the relationship of submission and obedience. The God of the Sermon on the Mount is one to whom people owe submission and obedience. No trinity is mentioned at all. In no place in Matthew five to seven does Jesus even remotely suggest that he himself is God Almighty.

From the Christian point of view the vicarious sacrifice of Jesus on the cross for forgiveness of sin is the heart of the Gospel. Jesus does suggest a condition for forgiveness of sin, but that condition is not his vicarious death on the cross. He says that we shall be forgiven as we forgive (Matthew 6:15), and judged as we judge others (Matthew 7:2).

Christians have rightly divided the Sermon on the Mount into three chapters, for it does in fact present three subjects. Belief in the law and the prophets is the subject of chapter five. Certainty of the Day of

judgement is the subject of chapter seven. Chapter six presents the faith of Jesus in practice.

Let us first take a look at chapter five. The subject here is to maintain the authority of the law and the prophets. When Jesus spoke to the crowd, he was faced with people who were suspicious of one thing, whether or not he upheld the law. The people had already seen miracles. They were ready to believe in Jesus provided that he could produce evidence that he was loyal to the law, and that he upheld the Torah, the books of Moses. This was crucial. Without it he would not be accepted.

So Jesus set about the task. First of all he gained the people's confidence by giving a series of blessings. Luke 6:24–26 adds curses to these. The familiar covenant of blessings and curses, so well known from the book of Deuteronomy, immediately flooded into his hearers' minds. They were on familiar ground. They felt at ease.

Then Jesus came to the point. 'Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill. For verily I say unto you, till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.' Matthew 5:17–19. There it is: Jesus has had his say. Stronger language could not have been invented. In the rest of the chapter he gives illustrations, first from the Ten commandments and then from other parts of the books of Moses. He illustrates how he supports the law.

Modern interpreters might maintain that Jesus gave a new law, because he contrasted what he said with what was said earlier by saying, 'But I say unto you...' But when Jesus says that anger is murder, surely no one with good sense will say that he means you can kill people after all as long as you are not angry with them. When he says to look in lust is the same as adultery, only an insane person would say he means that it is all right to go to bed with someone illicitly as long as you do not look at them with lust first. Jesus does not abrogate the law when he points out its spirituality. He does not give permission to disobey the law by striking out against hypocrisy.

In the same way Jesus supports the law of divorce and oaths. Untold misery has come from Christians who think Jesus abrogated the law of divorce by saying, 'Whosoever shall put away his wife causeth her to commit adultery.' In all of his commentaries Jesus is attacking hypocrisy, which is keeping the law in letter, but having altogether different intentions. In this case Jesus is attacking the hypocritical practice in the Near East of marrying with the intention of immediate divorce in order to give a legal face to prostitution. In a society where prostitution is not even given that legal basis, the true teaching here is likely to escape notice. Jesus affirms the law of Moses. He can do nothing else without discrediting himself. He accepts the legislation on divorce when it is used as originally intended.

When it comes to oaths, Christian interpreters have done little better. Jesus again attacks hypocrisy. In Matthew 23:16–23, Jesus tells precisely what kind of oath he is talking about. He is attacking the

practice of clothing a lie with an oath that is formally defective. A seller in the market-place might swear by the temple. When an irate buyer returned with a complaint, he would then say, 'Oh, I swore by the temple, so it is not binding. If I had sworn by the gold of the temple, it would have been binding.' Jesus attacks this hypocrisy, and in so doing upholds the law and acquires the confidence of his listeners.

Let us take a quick look at Matthew seven. The chapter shouts the subject from the very beginning. 'Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgement ye judge, ye shall be judged.' Matthew 7:1-2. Jesus gives many valuable hints on how to prepare for the judgement to come. He says to concentrate on yourself rather than on others. Most of us go through life spending a great deal of time talking and thinking about other people's faults and very little time correcting our own.

Jesus is practical and knows what we are like. He says to ask God for help. No one can stand in the judgement without the infinite grace of God. He says that we will be judged according to the law and the prophets and sums up the law and the prophets very neatly. 'Do as you would be done by.' Matthew 7:12. He warns us not to follow the crowd. Conformity will only take us to hell (verses 13-14). He warns us not to be taken in by false prophets and gives a hint on how to know them. He says that pretending to be religious will get you nowhere, but only those who do God's will can be saved in the judgement (verses 21-23). All in all, the chapter is about the Day of Judgement and how to prepare for it.

After establishing his authority on the law and the prophets, and before warning about the Day of Judgement, Jesus gives us a beautiful summary of his own teaching. Matthew six is above all the very teaching of Jesus Christ as presented in the Christian Scriptures. Anyone who truly desires to follow the faith of Jesus Christ can find the pillars of practical faith right here in this chapter. They are few and simple.

Most Christian creeds can be reduced to a few simple pillars, which are: belief in the Trinity, faith in the atoning sacrifice of Christ for the forgiveness of sin, the Church as the channel of grace, and the eternal reward. Judaism can be summed up as belief in one God, the Torah, and the covenant of God with the people of Israel. Islam is summed up as confession of one God, daily prayer in prostration, alms in charity, fasting, and pilgrimage. So how does Jesus sum up his faith according to the Christian Scriptures?

When we turn to Matthew six, the first subject is covered in verses one to four. We may be surprised to find that the first pillar of practice mentioned is giving alms in charity. Jesus warns us, aptly enough, to avoid hypocrisy in the giving of alms.

When we read on, the next pillar of practice appears in verses 5-15. That second pillar is prayer. Jesus does not tell us here how to pray. All of his listeners already knew this. They knew it from the law and the prophets. They knew that Daniel prostrated himself in prayer toward the house of God morning, afternoon and evening (Daniel 6:10). They knew from the Psalms of David, called *The Prayers* in Hebrew, that prayer should be done at set times in the day and should be preceded by ablutions. They

knew from the same Psalms that prayer should be done standing, bowing, and prostrating. They knew that prayer, according to the Psalms, included raising the hands and crying time and again, 'Yigdal Adonai' or in English 'The Lord be magnified' or in Arabic 'Allahu akbar'.

What Jesus did tell the people was to avoid hypocrisy in prayer, to pray briefly and simply, and then he gave them a list of appropriate subjects for prayer. The so-called Lord's Prayer is that list. It is not a model prayer to be repeated word for word, or the version of it given in Luke would have been identical. So the second pillar of practice mentioned in Matthew six is prayer in brevity, simplicity, and lack of hypocrisy.

The third pillar in the practice of the faith of Jesus is found in Matthew 6: 16–18. Here he mentions fasting, again with the warning that we must avoid hypocrisy. He does not tell us how to fast. But we already know how to fast, just as his listeners did. Is it the Christian fast of avoiding certain foods? No. It is a fast of total abstention from food and drink, just as Moses did on the mount (Exodus 34:28). That tradition came unbroken all the way down to Jesus, who practiced it himself according to Matthew 4: 1–2.

So far Jesus has attacked hypocrisy in the practice of faith. Now he comes to an entirely different problem. In Matthew 6: 16–34 we are not faced with hypocrisy, which is the plague of almsgiving in charity, prayer, and fasting. We are faced with fear and excuses. Those are the plagues of pilgrimage.

Jesus goes straight to the problem of how to convince people to go on pilgrimage to the house of God as they should by the example of the Christian Scriptures and as they were commanded to do in the law of Moses. The first excuse he meets is, 'Somebody might break in our house and steal our silver and gold while we are gone.' Matthew 6: 19–21. The next excuse he meets is, 'What are we going to eat and drink on the way? And how am I going to make up the lost time from work? I have to support my family. I have to buy new clothes for the children before school starts and I don't see how we are going to make ends meet. We can't go on pilgrimage this year.' Matthew 6: 22–34.

In sum, Matthew six gives in order four of the traditional Islamic pillars of practice as the very core of Jesus' message. Embedded as they are in the very structure of the passage, they suggest that other parts of the Bible might well be hiding features that may become clear only as we view them from an Islamic perspective.

Islamic belief and practice are not based on the Bible. They are based on the Qur'an and on the Sunna or example of the Prophet. The confrontation between Christian and Muslim is often largely a confrontation between books. For that reason Muslims assume that the Bible teaches what Christians believe and practice. They very often use the Bible to show that it does not teach Islam and shows evidence of not being valid.

Whether or not the Bible has been corrupted, as Muslim commentators and Christian scholars maintain, is beside the point for the present study. There is no reason why the Bible could not be approached from the opposite angle. The conflict of books is generally a deadlock. A new approach might raise fresh

issues among the traditions, and help us to see them in a new light. Does the Bible as we now have it, and as it has been used through centuries of Christian tradition, support Islamic beliefs and practices?

Some Muslims have appealed to the Christian Scriptures on behalf of their faith to some extent. Most such appeals surround the figure of the final prophet. Since much has been written about this, I have not given it a special chapter here. I shall merely summarize some of the more important arguments that Muslims have traditionally made.

The problem posed here is whether or not the Bible is complete and the faith finished, or whether it leaves the door open for prophets to come. The Bible on many occasions contends that people who rejected prophets and divinely appointed leaders in their own times, pretending to rely on earlier ones, no matter how valid these might have been, were lost.

Are there any Biblical reasons for rejecting the idea of additions to the canon? Revelation 22:18 appears to be a serious obstacle to addition. 'If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book.' The answer to this is obvious. These words refer to the whole book that was written in the scroll at hand, that is, the book of Revelation. They do not refer to the addition of more books to the collection of the canon. The book of Revelation itself was accepted in the canon only centuries after it was written. No other Biblical evidence is to be found against more prophets.

On the contrary much warning is given against false prophets and how to recognize them. 'For there shall arise a false Christ, and false prophets, and shall show great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect.' Matthew 24:24. If the prophetic revelation were closed, it would only remain to say that anyone claiming to be a prophet is false. The implication is that at least one more prophet is forthcoming.

Those who came to question John the Baptist reveal that the people of the time knew that another prophet was coming and were expecting him. John 1:19–25. 'And this is the record of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who art thou? And he confessed, and denied not; but confessed, I am not the Christ. And they asked him, What then? Art thou Elias? And he said, I am not. Art thou that prophet? And he answered, No. Then said they unto him, Who art thou? that we may give an answer to them that sent us. What say thou of thyself? He said, I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Elias. And they which were sent were of the Pharisees. And they asked him, and said unto him, Why baptizes thou then, if thou be not that Christ, nor Elias, neither that prophet?'

From this it appears clearly that three figures were expected: the promised Messiah or Christ, Elias or Elijah, and 'that prophet'. Although John in his modesty denied it, Jesus later stated that John was the expected Elias (Matthew 11:14). Jesus himself was the expected Messiah or Christ. Who then is the prophet to come? It is a fact that he does not appear in the Bible. So we must look for him after the time of Jesus.

We know that prophets according to the Bible, speak by the inspiration of the Spirit of God. So we can expect to find information if there is any in the promises relating to the future working of the Spirit of God. The most comprehensive of these are found in John 14–16. Looking through these chapters the following verses stand out.

John 14:26. 'But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you.'

John 15:26. 'But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceeded from the Father, he shall testify of me.'

John 16:7–14. 'Nevertheless I tell you the truth; it is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you. And when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgement: Of sin, because they believe not on me; Of righteousness, because I go to my Father, and ye see me no more; Of judgement, because the prince of this world is judged. I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will show you things to come. He shall glorify me: for he shall receive of mine, and shall show it unto you.'

Now the Spirit of God in the Bible narratives works not in a void but through human beings. This promise refers to a prophet who has ears and a mouth (John 16: 13). What do we learn from this prophecy of Jesus about the prophet to follow him? Muslim scholars have pointed out that the Greek word translated 'Comforter' is much like the Greek for 'Most Praised' or Ahmed, which is a form of the name Muhammad. This alternative is found in the Gospel of Barnabas and in some Syriac sources.

First of all, there is a three-part message. He will reprove the world of unbelief in Jesus Christ. He will bring a message of righteousness that is a renewed regard for obedience to the commandments. He will emphasize the importance of the Day of Judgement.

Secondly, Jesus remarks that there are many things to be said, but he cannot teach his hearers all of these things because they are not yet ready for them. The inference is that the prophet to come will teach some new points of doctrine and practice that the people of Jesus' time were not ready to receive. These things probably have to do with the change of the direction of prayer and place of pilgrimage from Jerusalem to another place, and other details that could not be accepted as long as the temple existed.

Thirdly, the coming prophet would guide into all truth. That is, when his message is given, there will never be any need for another message, since with his revelation all truth which God intended to reveal will have been revealed.

Fourthly, he will not speak using his own words. He will be verbally inspired. He will actually hear the message of God in spoken form from the angel and will recite verbally what he hears. He will thus be

different from some prophets who received the inspired message and wrote it in their own words.

Fifthly, he will reveal future events.

Sixthly, he will preach the things that Jesus himself taught.

It would appear that we have a good deal of information about the prophet to follow Jesus, probably enough to identify him with certainty. Nevertheless, on another occasion Jesus gave still more information. In Matthew 7: 15–20, Jesus points out that 'by their fruits ye shall know them.' This is generally thought to refer to actions, bad fruits being evil actions and good fruits good acts. Psalm 1:3 describes this prophet 'who brings forth fruit in his season.' The book of Revelation suggests that the tree has twelve different fruits (Revelation 22:2). It is very possible that Jesus is referring to the fact that the prophet to come should have twelve pure descendants or followers who would have authority and act as the final divine guides in their age. We can be sure of this only if we find a prominent contestant for the position of Prophethood who actually had twelve such descendants or representatives.

Contemplation of the seven criteria shows immediately that most of them are subject to interpretation. It would be easy, for example, to construe the three-pronged message to fit almost any claimant to prophethood. The one criterion which is hard and fast is the prophecy on the means of revelation. We must look for a prophet who heard a voice and dictated the message word for word.

Joseph Smith, for example, claimed to receive the message on golden plates from which he translated in writing. Although he might fit all of the other criteria, he misses on the most objective one.

Ellen White, to take another prominent example, claimed to hear the voice, but she never claimed verbal inspiration, nor did she dictate the message of the angel in a book. She wrote her books in words of her own choice. Besides, she, unlike Joseph Smith, was not followed by a succession of twelve. Nor did she herself in fact claim to be the promised prophet.

All of the criteria can be easily fitted to the case of Muhammad. But the one objective criterion, the means of revelation, seems so overwhelmingly appropriate that it is difficult to dismiss it. The story is that Muhammad was praying and meditating in a cave when the angel Gabriel suddenly appeared to him and he heard the words: 'In the name of God the most gracious, ever merciful! Recite in the name of thy Lord who creates perfectly. He creates man from a clot. Recite! And thy Lord is the most honorable!' Qur'an 96: 1–3.

The subject of Biblical prophecy as related to Muhammad is widely dealt with by Ahmed Deedat, Abdul-Ahad Dawud, and many others. I have said little here in addition to such studies and left out much that has been said. I would only add something to Ahmed Deedat's excellent handling of Deuteronomy 18: 18, 'I will raise up a prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee, and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him.' Christians often claim that this refers to Jesus. But the parallel between Moses and Jesus seems inconsistent, since Christians claim Jesus to

be God and deny such status to Moses. If Jesus is God, he is definitely not like Moses and the passage cannot apply to him. If he is not God, then the Christian doctrine falls.

The history of Muhammad is tragic. After the death of Muhammad many Muslims followed unjust and irreligious caliphs. The later caliphs changed the religion to suit themselves. This is recognized by both orientalist and Muslims alike. The family of the prophet's daughter was hounded, persecuted, poisoned and murdered by the so called Muslim State. It is only a miracle that some knowledge of the eleven descendants of the daughter of Muhammad has come down to us. These pure, humble, persecuted people might well be compared to the twelve fruits of the good tree Jesus mentions in Matthew seven.

Since we are examining the Bible as the traditional, historical text of Christianity I have chosen to use the King James Version in English and the Hebrew Masoretic text and received text of the Greek New Testament from which it was translated. The editions of the latter I have followed are The New Testament, The Greek Text Underlying the English Authorized Version of 1611, Trinitarian Bible Society, London, and *Biblia Hebraica*, Johanne Leusden, Everardo Van Der Hooght, Judah D'Allemand, London 1822. I have also referred to the Byzantine Greek text in the edition of : “TA BIBΛIA, H EIA PAH TH AIA TE KAI KAINH”, Moscow, 1841.

The method will be to examine the whole Bible in terms of the various Islamic beliefs and practices. Critical method will be relevant to the extent necessary to identify Biblical beliefs and practices in context which show similarity or equivalence to Islamic ones. The method is rigorous and scientific, but approaches problems vastly different from those usually examined by scholars. It is not the goal to establish the original or source text.

That would defeat the purpose. What is of interest is to what extent the Bible as it has come down to us through Christian tradition reflects not Christian but Islamic aspects. Such a study would be fortuitous except for the fact that the texts of Christianity and Islam share a geographical and to a great extent cultural heritage.

The examination of the Biblical text will entail first of all the establishment of linguistic equivalents for Islamic features. The second and supporting method will be to establish conceptual equivalents. The second method obviously lacks the objectivity of the first, but will certainly prove fruitful, as it allows us to bring to bear on each subject texts which may be relevant, but which might be overlooked from a mere linguistic approach. The linguistic approach is used first and primarily in order to preserve objectivity.

Since Islamic approaches to written Scripture make a clear distinction between writings purporting to quote God directly (the Qur'an), and writings purporting to quote human beings (*hadith* or traditions), I have indicated those distinctions in the use of Bible texts. Texts purporting to be quotations of the very words of God are marked with a star. Strangely that basic distinction is largely overlooked by Jewish and Christian readers.

Judaism and Christianity share many beliefs and practices, some of which are considered fundamental

to Islam. Among such fundamental beliefs in common are the belief in Scripture-bearing prophets, angels, and sacred Scriptures as such. The Day of judgement is a belief common to all three traditions as well. These fundamentals are copiously represented in the Bible, and they are the focus of a brief exposition in chapter one. Other aspects are common to all three traditions, but have features which distinguish them within the traditions. It will be of interest to focus on such distinguishing features in order to establish what precisely is described by the Biblical texts.

A study of this kind, because of its pioneering character as well as the limits of time and space, can only be partial. I cannot examine all of the texts bearing on a subject in detail, or even mention all of them for most subjects. Many questions will remain for further research, but I have tried to touch on the most important ones. I hope that the reader will thoughtfully consider whether or not the Bible supports the basic teachings of Islam.

The best way of establishing Islamic beliefs and practices is to refer to authoritative Islamic texts. I have taken as basic sources *Islamic Teachings in Brief* by Ayatullah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i, Ansariyan Publications, Qum, Islamic Republic of Iran, translated by Muzhgan Jalali; and the introductory notes of *The Holy Qur'an*, S.V. Mir Ahmed Ali, Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, New York, 1988.

The specific issues I have identified as both representing Islam and showing distinctively Islamic features in contrast to other traditions are the following: the concepts of God and divine guidance, purity, prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, sacrifice, polygamy and concubinage. All of these are included in Ali's Introduction to *The Holy Qur'an* with the exception of polygamy and concubinage (Ali 1988:69a, 104a). He deals with polygamy and concubinage in brief notes on important topics (Ali 1988:139a, 140a). They are all dealt with in detail in Tabataba'i.

Source URL: <https://www.al-islam.org/islam-in-the-bible-thomas-mcelwain/introduction>