

SHARED HISTORY OF 2 FAITHS SHOW COMMON BELIEFS

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I had been looking forward to writing my post-Xmas column, and had decided that I would write about the common beliefs of Christians and Muslims regarding Jesus Christ and his mother Mary. It seemed appropriate to consider the shared history of the two faiths at the beginning of a new year.

I hoped for a bit of respite from the violence in our lives so that I could focus on faith and peace in this column. Well, it was not going to happen. Another young, bright, educated Muslim man would be brainwashed into seeing violence as the solution to fight against real and perceived injustices against the global community of Muslims.

This is such a contradiction with the Islam so many of us believe in. This call to violence, to be committed by the young, is not about religion; it is about the perverted and distorted political use of a religion. But sadly whatever the justification, the violence makes matters worse for all people, especially for Muslims.

Enough! I shall still write about our common bonds as people of faith.

It may surprise many people that Jesus is part of the faith of Muslims, and both he and his mother, Mary, are spoken of with great respect in the Quran. True, Jesus is not spoken of as divine, but as a Prophet, and therein lies the fundamental difference.

Islam is described as one of the Abrahamic religions, along with Judaism and Christianity. This is simply because the revelations in the 7th century were to an Arab Prophet living in the Arabian Peninsula. These revelations, over a period of 23 years, were gathered to create "The Book" – the Quran.

The Quran uses the stories of the previous Semitic prophets as lessons, because these were familiar to the Arabs. But the Quran has a universal message, about other communities, beyond the Abrahamic ones. It often states that God has sent apostles to all peoples who call people to the one God and to a life of goodness. The message is not limited to any one group or nation, and this is important for those of us Muslims who are not Arab, and to those who are of different faith.

"To every community have We appointed different ways of worship which they ought to observe..." And again - "Every community faces a direction of its own, of which God is the focal point."

Also "Within every community have We raised up an apostle, entrusted with this message: `Worship God, and shun the powers of evil."

There is a chapter in the Quran titled Mary which tells her story. The Quranic version is that Mary was visited by an angel who told her that God had chosen her, and that she would bear a child of great honour in this world and in the life to come, and the child will be of those who are near to God.

Is it not significant that God sent a direct message to a woman and not through a male intermediary?

When Mary questioned how this would happen, when no man had touched her, the angel replied "When God wills a thing to be, God says `Be' and it is. God will impart to him revelation and wisdom and will make him an apostle to the children of Israel."

In the Quran, Jesus states: "I have come to confirm the truth of whatever there still remains of the Torah, and to make lawful to you some of the things which were forbidden to you."

The difference between Muslims and Christians is not about the birth or existence of Jesus but about his nature. For Christians he is divine and part of the trinity, while for Muslims he is a Prophet and did not claim divinity for himself.

God in the Quran says' "It is not conceivable that a human being to whom God had granted revelation, and sound judgement and prophethood, should thereafter have said to people `Worship me beside God.' He exhorted them to become men of God."

The monotheism in Islam – the indivisibility and uniqueness of God - is absolute, and yet there are verses about the virtuous people in other religions.

God says to the Prophet Mohammad: "For sorrow not over people who deny the truth, for verily those who have attained to faith in this divine writ, as well as those who follow the Jewish faith, and the Sabians, and the Christians – all those who believe in God and the Last day and do righteous deeds - no fear need they have, and neither shall they grieve."

This seems like a conundrum, but for me it demonstrates the breadth of acceptance Islam has for more than its own followers. I don't think I am being biased but I don't know of another religion which has this message of acceptance of believers of other faiths.

I can just picture readers shaking their heads in disbelief, as they see the few Muslims behaving in violent not peaceful ways and wondering how incongruent it is with what I think the Quran teaches. All I can say is that individuals interpret and mis-use a text as they so wish, and this is true about all religious texts.

May 2010 be a blessed year and may understanding come to those who see violence as the answer to addressing any injustices. Trite but true that violence begets violence.