

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

What do Muslims think about Jesus, Christians?

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Given these troubled times, we need to counter the urge to judge the world's 1.5 billion Muslims by the actions of a relatively few extremists.

Osama bin Laden was not the voice of Islam, and ISIS does not represent Muslims. Neither are the recent terror events representative of Muslims nor of true Islamic faith. We need to learn what majority Muslims believe by listening to them, not to their enemies. As we do, we should also consider what Islam says about Jesus (and his followers, Christians).

Perhaps the most characteristic Islamic belief is monotheism: the belief that there is one God, Allah. A Muslim believes, first and foremost, in One God, Supreme and Eternal, Infinite and Mighty, Merciful and Compassionate, Creator and Provider. While many Christians these days believe that Allah is the name of the Muslim God, Christians in Arab-speaking countries call God Allah. As a divine name, the term "Allah" preceded the advent of Islam and is the Arabic equivalent of the Hebrew word "Elohim." Arabic New Testaments call God Allah.

According to Islam, Allah communicated through a host of prophets beginning with Adam and proceeding through, to name a few, Abraham, Moses, David, Ishmael and

Jesus. God's final and definitive revelation, one that reaffirmed the monotheistic message of the previous prophets, was revealed by God to the Prophet Muhammad in the early seventh century. Muhammad then preached the essence of that final revelation, "God is One," and proclaimed submission or surrender as the only pathway to God ("Islam" means "submission").

A Muslim, then, is anyone who submits to God. And so we read in Quran 2.62: "The believers, the Jews, and the Christians – all those who believe in God and the Last Day and do good – will have their reward with their Lord. No fear for them, nor will they grieve." (Haleem translation) According to the Quran, any person who is honest, does good deeds and submits to God will be rewarded. One needn't have heard about Islam, know about the Quran or be aware that God's name in Arabic is Allah. Submission to God is the true religion, whatever you call yourself.

If Islam holds that Christians can be true believers, what does Islam think about Jesus?

Mustafa Akyol, in his recently published "The Islamic Jesus" (St. Martin's Press), addresses this timely issue. Akyol, a Turkish journalist and author, is most famous for his 2011 book, "Islam Without Extremes: A Muslim Case for Liberty" (W.W. Norton), in which he offered an argument for Islamic

If you go

Mustafa Akyol, "The Islamic Jesus"

With Jewish and Christian responses
7 p.m. June 19
Center for Health Sciences
301 Michigan St. NE
More information at interfaithunderstanding.org

liberalism. The book was praised by the Financial Times as "a forthright and elegant Muslim defense of freedom."

In his deeply interfaith work, "The Islamic Jesus: How the King of the Jews Became a Prophet of Islam," Akyol retells the story of Isa, the Arabic name for Jesus, as narrated in the Quran. He explores the relationship of the Islamic view of Jesus to Jesus as portrayed in various New Testament texts. He notes some remarkable similarities between Jesus in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, on the one hand, and the epistle of James, on the other. Early Christianity, he argues, was James-like, with its emphasis on works — "Faith without works is dead" (James 2:14-26); and in the first three Gospels we hear about the Messiah's instigation of God's kingdom on earth, a kingdom marked by the superior righteousness and compassion of its citizens.

These early Christians, most of them Jews, honored Jesus as a prophet and the Messiah, and sought salvation by faith and works. Later, Akyol argues, Christianity would move in a more Pauline (and Johannine) direction with an emphasis on the divinity of Christ and justification by faith alone.

The earlier, more Jewish strain of Christianity, Akyol notes, bears remarkable similarities to the main doctrines of Islam.

Akyol's important book can serve two purposes. It can remind all Muslims, especially the extremists, of the Quran's clear and favorable attitudes towards Christians and Jews. And it can assist all Christians to a deeper understanding of the sources of their own beliefs and practices. Taken together, the book can bring Muslim-Christian-Jew together to explore the foundations and meaning of their faith and practices — in relationships marked by peace, justice, compassion and harmony.

Mustafa Akyol will be in West Michigan on June 19. You can join with your Muslim, Christian and Jewish neighbors to hear him talk about his book, listen to gracious but firm responses from a Christian pastor and Jewish professor, and think together about how we can work together for peace and understanding.

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