

# *A Muslim and a Christian in Dialogue*

## *Badru D. Kateregga and David W. Shenk*

### **Authors' Preface**

Hundreds of millions of Muslims and Christians are each other's neighbors. The faithful in both communities believe they have been called by God to be witnesses, yet they seldom hear each other's witness. The collision of their histories has created walls which separate. Although both communities worship the same God and seek to be the people of God, they seldom listen to one another.

This book is an attempt by a Muslim and a Christian to witness and to listen. We, the authors, are close friends. We have taught together in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Kenyatta University College, Kenya. Badru Kateregga, a Muslim, taught Islamic history and theology. David Shenk, a Christian, taught Christian history and theology. We have taught comparative religion in a team-teaching relationship. Often the team-teaching was a dialogue, a witness from one faith to another in the presence of our students.

We have sensed that the dialogue in witness between Muslims and Christians is serious. The issues are profound. They are about the basic questions of the human situation. This means that in the hearing and the giving of witness in dialogue there is pain. Perhaps we mutually fear the pain. Perhaps that is one reason Muslims and Christians seldom speak with one another concerning faith.

Nevertheless, we authors believe witness in dialogue is vital. We need to learn to speak with one another from within our respective communities of faith. That is what we have tried to do in this book. We have not minced words. We have spoken with candor. We have each attempted to be as faithful as possible to the respective witness to which we each believe God has called us.

The book is divided into two sections. The first part is written by Badru as a Muslim faith witness. The second part is written by David as a Christian faith witness.

Each part consists of twelve chapters. At the end of each chapter is a response from the one to whom the witness is being given. That is to say, at the end of each of the twelve chapters of Muslim witness, there is a Christian response; similarly at the end of each of the twelve chapters of Christian witness, there is a Muslim response. In some cases, there is a further statement of clarification following the response.

We have written as individuals and as friends. We are personally responsible for what we have said, for ultimately faith witness is intensely personal. Nevertheless, we do speak from within particular faith communities. Badru has relied heavily on the Qur'an for his presentation, and David has based his writing primarily on the Bible. Badru witnesses from within the Sunni experience. David gives his witness from within the evangelical Protestant experience. Yet both have attempted to be sensitive to the total faith communities from which their respective witnesses emerge.

The theological and practical dimensions of faith explored in this book are not exhaustive but are indications of the nature of the encounter between Christians and Muslims. The book represents a comparative theology which we hope is free of judgmentalism and bias. We have tried to stick to our self-imposed rule: Don't interpret my faith for me!

We believe this book will provide constructive insights for any Muslims or Christians who want to understand the nature of the two great faith communities of Islam and Christianity. We hope it can be used as a basis for discussion and dialogue between Christians and Muslims.

We also believe this book would be valuable for students in upper high school, in Islamic and Christian theological schools, and as an introductory book for university students.

Muslims are usually uncomfortable with Christians writing about Islam. Similarly Christians seldom identify with Muslim interpretations of Christianity. This book, jointly authored by a Muslim and a Christian, has been written under the glaring light of mutual presence. Every word we have written has been honed by knowledge that we are working together. Honesty, kindness, and sensitivity have therefore been absolutely necessary.

—*Badru D. Kateregga*  
*David W. Shenk*

*In the Name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful.*

## **There Is No God But Allah**

### **THE MUSLIM WITNESS**

Islam means total submission to the commands and will of Allah,<sup>1</sup> the only true God. The first and greatest teaching of Islam is proclaimed by the *Shahada* (confession): *La ilaha illa `llah Muhammadun rasal Allah*. This means: There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is the apostle of Allah. It is this very confession which, once uttered sincerely and followed completely, makes one a real Muslim. It is this Shahada which leads a Muslim throughout his life.

Islam is a strictly monotheistic religion. The key *Surah* (chapter) in the Qur'an testifies to Islam's monotheism.

Say: He is Allah, the One!  
 Allah, the eternally Besought of all!  
 He begetteth not nor was begotten.  
 And there is none comparable unto Him. (Qur'an 112)

A Muslim must believe in One God (Allah). Belief in Allah is the very basis of the *al-Din* (religion) of Islam. Allah Himself has commanded, "And cry not unto any other god along with Allah. There is no god save Him" (Qur'an 28:88). Elsewhere we read, "Surely pure religion is for Allah only" (Qur'an 39:3).

### **God is One**

No human language is good enough to describe God, for nothing else is like Him. God's nature is beyond our conception. Nevertheless we do know He is One. Allah, the One true God, is not far from us, for He is with us always. The Qur'an says, "We (God) are nearer to him (man) than his jugular vein" (Qur'an 50:16).

Allah is One, and only He is God. He is the only one worthy of worship. Allah said, "Choose not two gods. There is only One God. So of Me, Me only, be in awe" (Qur'an 16:51).

All other things and beings which humans both know and know not are God's creatures, and we must recognize that all forms of God's creation are not in any way to be compared to Him. "I am only a warner, and there is no God save Allah, the One, the Absolute" (Qur'an 38:66).

In another verse God says, "Follow that which is sent down unto you from your Lord, and follow no protecting friends beside Him" (Qur'an 7:3).

So, because God is One, no one else can share even an atom of His divine power and authority. God alone possesses the attributes of divinity. Because God is One and One only, to associate any being with God is both a sinful and an infidel act. Islam makes clear that God has no son, no father, brother, sister, wife, or daughters. The pre-Islamic (*jahiliyya*) idea of calling goddesses daughters of Allah (al-Manat, al-Lat, al-Uzza) was condemned by the Prophet (peace be upon him) for Allah has no need for daughters. In His unity, God is not like any other person or thing that can come to anyone's mind. His qualities and nature are conspicuously unique. He has no associates.

### **God the Creator**

A Muslim must believe that Allah is the Creator of the universe and everything in it. The Qur'an says, "He it is Who created the heavens and the earth in truth" (Qur'an 6:73). It adds,

Lo! your Lord is Allah Who created the heavens and the earth in six days, then mounted He the Throne. He covereth the night with the day, which is in haste to follow it, and hath made the sun and the moon and the stars subservient by His command. His verily is all creation and commandment. Blessed be Allah, the Lord of the Worlds. (Qur'an 7:54)

These verses remind us that nothing can come to life on its own. Everything, including the earth we live on and the heavens we see above, was created by Almighty God.

God does not merely create and abandon His creatures. He goes on fashioning and evolving new forms. He sustains all that He has created according to His ways. "He is Allah, the Creator, the Shaper out of naughts, the Fashioner. His are the most beautiful names" (Qur'an 59:24). He is the Sustainer of the universe.

God has created man and kindly provided for him. Concerning the creation of man, the Qur'an says,

He it is Who created you from dust, then from a drop (of seed) then from a clot, then bringeth you forth as a child, then (ordaineth) that ye attain full strength and afterward that ye become old men—though some among you die before—and that ye reach an appointed term, that haply ye may understand. (Qur'an 40:67-68).

God created all that we can see and cannot see, by the divine command "Be." And "there it was." By this very command, the Lord created the universe and all that is in it.

It is the sincere Muslim belief that God did not rest after creating the universe and all the creatures. He needs no rest like humans and animals. God is absolute life, which is free from any such need. The Qur'an says, "There is no God save Him, the Alive, the Eternal. Neither slumber nor sleep overtaketh Him. Unto Him belongeth whatsoever is in the heavens and whatsoever is in the earth" (Qur'an 2:255). God is active as the Creator, the Life Giver and Life Remover, the Sustainer and the sole Controller of all His creation.

## **The Names of God**

God is the Supreme Reality. He has revealed to humankind ninety-nine beautiful names (*al-asma al husna*) which indicate His transcendent majesty and unity. The Qur'an says, "Allah's are the fairest names. Invoke Him by them. And leave the company of those who blaspheme His names. They will be requited what they do" (Qur'an 7:180).

In a *Hadith*<sup>2</sup> reported by Abu Huraira, the Prophet (Peace be upon him) [PBUH] is reported to have said, "Verily there are ninety-nine names of Allah, and whosoever recites them shall enter Paradise."<sup>3</sup>

These names are not used to divide Allah, for Allah cannot be more than One, but rather to express some of His attributes. Muslims use these names in reverence for God and as part of praise and prayer. God may always be invoked by a name relevant to the need of His beseecher. We shall be describing some of these names, such as *Rahman* (most Gracious), *Rahim* (most Merciful), or *al-Fialil* (most Majestic).

## **God is Merciful**

All surahs of the Qur'an except one<sup>4</sup> begin with the *Basmalah*<sup>5</sup>—the statement, "In the Name of Allah, the Compassionate (or Beneficent), the Merciful." The Basmalah is the common statement a Muslim must recite before doing anything. It constantly reminds the believer of the mercy of God to all His creation. A careful look at the Qur'an shows that there are numerous *ayat* (verses) which describe God's love and mercy for mankind.

Allah says in the Holy Qur'an, "Allah it is Who hath appointed for you night that ye may rest therein, and day for seeing. Lo! Allah is a Lord of bounty for mankind, yet most of mankind give not thanks" (Qur'an 40:61).

God continues in another verse,

Allah it is Who appointed for you *the earth for a dwelling place* and the sky for a canopy, and fashioned you and perfected your shapes, and hath provided you with good things. Such is Allah, your Lord. Then blessed be Allah, the Lord of the Worlds. (Qur'an 40:64)

Humans enjoy the mercy of God Who is kind and good. God's mercy is to anyone, believer or unbeliever, obedient or disobedient, Muslim or non-Muslim, black or white.

The Qur'an states, "Allah is He Who created the heavens and the earth, and causeth water to descend from the sky, thereby producing fruits as food for you" (Qur'an 14:32). The Qur'an continues, "And He giveth you of all ye ask of Him, and if ye would count the bounty of Allah he cannot reckon it. Lo! man is verily a wrong-doer, an ingrate" (Qur'an 14:34).

God's mercy for His creation is immeasurable. We cannot imagine or count His favors to humankind. He gives people food, drink, the means of movement, and all the necessities of life. He provides for them irrespective of their behavior. God has created humans in the best form of creation and has given them everything they need for spiritual and physical growth. God has given all this because of His mercy. God is the all-Merciful, and through His mercy persons attain peace, tranquility, hope, and confidence. The mercy of God is real and active; it pervades all the dimensions of the human experience.

Furthermore, God has promised to extend His love to those who obey His will. His mercy is extended to all humankind. His love is extended to those who submit to His will. The Qur'an says, "Say, (O Muhammad, to mankind) If ye love Allah, follow me; Allah will love you and forgive you your sins. Allah is Forgiving, Merciful" (Qur'an 3:31).

### **God is All-Powerful**

Having seen that God is Compassionate and Merciful, we must also note that it is only God Who possesses all power. None besides Allah can benefit or harm a person. Only God can provide for human needs or give and take away life. The Holy Qur'an proclaims, "Knowest thou not that it is Allah unto Whom belongeth the sovereignty of the heavens and earth; and ye have not, beside Allah, any friend or helper" (Qur'an 2:107). With God alone rests the authority to exercise power in the heavens, on earth, and over the entire creation.

God's supreme authority and power cannot be challenged by anyone or anything. He is the Supreme Master of the whole universe as well as its Creator. A Qur'anic verse which comments on God's sovereign power reads,

*Say, O Allah! Owner of Sovereignty! Thou givest sovereignty unto whom Thou wilt, and Thou withdrawest sovereignty from whom Thou wilt. Thou exaltest whom Thou wilt and Thou abasest whom Thou wilt. In Thy hand is the good. Lo! Thou art Able to do all things. (Qur'an 3:26)*

This is a serious admonition from Allah to those who hold power on earth. They should remember that God gives power and also removes rulers from power as He pleases. He is capable of doing this because all power comes from Him; He is the Lord of power.

"Now Allah be exalted, the True King! There is no God save Him, the Lord of the Throne of Grace. He who crieth unto any other god along with Allah hath no proof thereof"

(Qur'an 23:116-117). This verse explains the nature of the power of God. He is the most exalted Power, the Sovereign, the Master. The firm belief in the all-powerful nature of God can help man to give the best possible explanation of many mysterious things that happen in life.

Allah is the undisputed Authority Who alone is entitled to receive obedience, and in fact receives it. He is the most Supreme, so heads should bow to Him in submission and adoration. Powerful as He is, God remains pure and free from all sins and evil.

### **God is Wise and All-Knowing**

The Omnipotent, Merciful, Benevolent Allah is also all-wise and all-knowing (omniscient). The Holy Qur'an teaches, "And keep your opinion secret or proclaim it, lo! He is Knower of all that is in the breasts (of persons). Should He not know what He created? And He is the Subtle, the Aware" (Qur'an 67:13-14).

Muslims take these attributes of God's knowledge very seriously. For instance, one should not commit sins in the dark thinking that because there is no one around one is not being noticed. God's knowledge extends to everything seen or unseen, spoken or unspoken. Nothing is hidden from Him, desires or undeclared intentions.

God's wisdom and knowledge is stressed in several verses of the Qur'an. For instance, He says,

*His is the praise in the Hereafter, and He is the Wise, the Aware. . . . Not an atom's weight, or less than that or greater escapeth Him in the heavens or in the earth, but it is a clear record.*

*(Qur'an 34:1, 3)*

*And He knoweth what is in the land and the sea. Not a leaf falleth but He knoweth it, not a grain amid the darkness of the earth, naught of wet or dry but [it is noted] in a clear record.*

*(Qur'an 6:59)*

It is the perfect God Who knows everything happening in the present and in the future. He knows what is near and far, what is in heaven and on earth. His knowledge is unbound. He instructs humans in wisdom through His messengers and written Scriptures. He also reveals to humans the knowledge of the laws of nature and His wonderful signs in His creation and in the order of the universe. This is all part of His wisdom and knowledge.

### **God is Eternal**

As Muslims we are strongly commanded to believe and know that God is eternal. By this we acknowledge that God has no beginning and no end, that He has been there and will be

there always. There is none after Him nor before Him. He was when there was nothing and will be when there will be nothing. The Qur'an states, "He is the First and the Last, and the Outward and the Inward; and He is Knower of all things" (Qur'an 57:3).

The eternal God is not limited by time, space, place, or circumstance. As He exists beyond time, He cannot go into senility. God is preexistent and eternal, yet other forms of existence will come to an end. Everything that exists will perish except God Who will endure forever. The Qur'an teaches, "Everyone that is thereon will pass away; There remaineth but the countenance of thy Lord of Might and Glory" (Qur'an 55:26-27). This teaching is important because it reminds the believers that as human beings we are nothing but visitors on this world. God alone is eternally living and present; all else is transient.

The most magnificent human works, such as spacecraft or skyscrapers, are nothing in the eyes of God. The great empires, the marvelous works of science, art, and all other spheres of human endeavor will perish. The great wonders of nature such as the mountains, the valleys, the seas, the stars, the sun, and the moon will equally perish at the time God wills. Only God the Supreme Master of the whole universe and the Creator of everything will remain.

### **Summary**

In attempting to understand the nature and works of God, we learn God is only One without partner or son. He is Creator of the universe and everything found in it. He is the Compassionate and Merciful and His mercy is to all creatures. He is just. He is the Guide and Guardian of everything. He is preexistent and eternal. He is all-knowing and all-wise. He is loving and provident, and His mercy for His creatures knows no boundary. He is holy and cannot commit sins or do evil. He is independent and unique.

Because He is unique, people cannot know everything about God, and even the list of ninety-nine names of God is not in any way exhaustive. Nevertheless, the Muslim can acknowledge God through reflection, meditation, firm commitment to the credal statement, *'La ilaha illa 'llah*, and the total peaceful surrender to His commands and will.

### **A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE**

Christians and Muslims worship the same God. Both give witness that there is One true and only God, the righteous and transcendent Creator of all things in heaven and earth. Furthermore, Christians accept with thankfulness all ninety-nine names of God that Muslims repeat in worship and praise to God. Even the name Allah is affirmed by Christians as a name of God. The Prophet Abraham knew God as El or Elohim, which is a Hebrew form of the Arabic *Allah*. It is no wonder the Qur'an affirms that those closest to the Muslims are the Christians. The profound Muslim appreciation of the sovereignty and transcendence of God is a witness Christians need to hear.

Nevertheless, within our common faith in God, Muslims and Christians experience differences. These differences are rooted in different understandings of God's relationship to people. The Qur'an stresses the revelation of God's commands and His names to humans. In the Bible we perceive God as the One Who reveals Himself to humankind.

The biblical witness is that God has chosen to reveal Himself in personal self-disclosure with humankind. God as the One Who encounters personally is known as Yahweh, the covenant God, the "I AM," Who is always present calling people into a covenant relationship with Himself. Yahweh reveals not only His will, commands, and names to humankind, but also Himself in personal self-disclosure.

The Bible reveals that Yahweh in His self-disclosure reveals that He is the One Who loves us perfectly. In fact, the biblical witness is that Yahweh God gives Himself in suffering, redemptive love. Because of His love, He sorrows when we sorrow, He suffers when we suffer, He is pained by our sin. God loves us totally.

The Christian witness is that God invites us into a covenant fellowship with Himself; God invites us to know and have fellowship with the One Whom Islam praises through the reverent repetition of His ninety-nine glorious names.

## **Notes**

1. The word *Allah* is Arabic and difficult to translate exactly. The word means the unique God Who possesses all the attributes of perfection and beauty in their infinitude. Muslims feel strongly that the English word *God* does not convey the real meaning of the word *Allah*. However, in this book *Allah* and *God* will be used interchangeably.

2. *Hadith* means prophetic tradition.

3. Reported by Abu Huraira, *Sahih Muslim*, Vol. IV (Lahore: M. Ashraf-by Siddiqi, 1975), p. 1409.

4. Surat Tauba (chapter 9).

5. In Arabic transliteration the Basmalah reads, *Bis-mi-llahi ar-Rahmani ar-Rahim*.

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