

In Overall Summary ...

As it effects the daily lives of its followers, Islam differs from Christianity in that it seeks to govern every corner of believers' lives by establishing a rule of law, a set of directives imposed by a network of religious scholars, political forces and government administrations.

Christianity, on the other hand, while not neglecting its prophetic role of declaring publicly to governments and people alike what the standards are that God expects, seeks to confront people with a personal call from Jesus, the Son of God, to follow him in discipleship. The call offers freedom from the guilt and consequences of sin and the certainty of redemption, as well as the comfort and support of the work of the Holy Spirit..

As Jesus prepared for his future ministry in the wilderness (Matthew 4.1-11), he was confronted with a temptation, one among three, to become the ruler of the kingdoms of the world. He could have ruled wisely and left at his death a legacy of legislation to make people pious in worship, moral in lifestyle and obedient to God's commandments. He chose to reject the temptation and went out and called his disciples by name to join him. He continues to do this.

To Christian eyes, Islam appears to be what Christianity might have become if Jesus had given in to that temptation

Questions for Consideration

1. How does blasphemy in Christianity break down the relationship between God and his people?
2. Can you think of instances in the media where acts regarded as blasphemous by Muslims have resulted in violence or official retribution?
3. How can Christians who believe in the authority of the scriptures also acknowledge the right of individuals, believers and non-believers, to the liberty of their own opinion? Does this also apply to church members who have made certain public commitments? In what way?
4. Can you think of instances in the modern church where it or its members have attacked the right of other church members to freedom of opinion?
5. How similar have these instances been to the Islamic concept that to reach deeply into the meaning of scripture is blasphemous in that it breaches submission to God?

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Islam and Christianity *Series*

No. 7 **Blasphemy**



Blasphe^my is a concept viewed differently by Islam and Christianity.

The Christian concept is related to the words of the Third of the Ten Commandments,

“You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.”

Exodus 20.7

The meaning ascribed to these words are best stated in the words of the Westminster Shorter Catechism which says,

The Third Commandment requires the reverent use of God’s names, titles, attributes, ordinances and works. (Q 54)

and goes on to say,

The Third Commandment forbids all profaning or abusing of anything whereby God makes himself known.” (Q 55)

To the Christian mind any action which takes lightly, mocks, abuses or insults God himself, his names, his nature, his teachings, his acts throughout history and his worship is an act of blasphemy and is offensive both to him and his followers.

Uttering the name of God as an oath or as an interjection is regarded as a use of his name in a less than reverential manner and is blasphemy to both the Christian and Jewish minds.

Jesus taught that there was one form of blasphemy which was unforgivable, the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. This is an action or utterance which ascribes to Satanic origins the great and good works of God. Although it could be thought of as a simplification, it may be further understood to mean that the attitude of the offender is so far from God as to be unreachable with the truth of the Christian faith.

Blasphemy is an act which grieves God and, like all sin, weakens our relationship with him.

There are elements in common with Islam. For Mus-

lims blasphemy involves speaking ill of Allah, his prophets (including Jesus), his other messengers (such as angels), his teachings, his promises and threats (heaven and hell) and the rituals and practices of Islam. It is regarded as a sin which results, failing repentance, in an eternity in hell.

Surprisingly, expressions such as “Good God!”, etc. when used as interjections are not regarded as blasphemy by Muslims as long as there can be an assumption that Allah is acknowledged as God. They become blasphemy with expressions such as “Holy mackerel!” or “Jesus Christ!” which implies that Allah is replaced as God by something or someone else.

But the interpretation of blasphemy in Islam goes further than this. It includes the abandonment of Islam generally or any denial of the essential principles of Islam.

The reasons for this need to be explained. According to Islam, every child is born with the God-given ability to know and believe in his Creator. Muhammad can be quoted as saying,

“Every child is born with the believing nature (al-fitra), it is his parents who make him into a Jew or a Christian.”

Al-Kulayni, al-Usul mina ‘l-Kāfi, vol. 2, p. 13

As the meaning of Islam, “submission”, suggests, while people are drawn back to their natural religion by an act of their own free-will, the believer then submits everything to the will of Allah. At this point, he surrenders the right of making decisions to Allah and his prophet:

“No believing man and no believing woman has a choice in their own affairs when Allah and His Messenger have decided on an issue.”

Qur’an 33:36

The apostate then is denying Allah who expects submission through the abandonment of free-will. In addition it casts doubt on the authority of prophet Muhammad. This is an act of blasphemy.

According to Muslim Law, a male apostate is liable to be put to death if he continues in his error. A female apostate is not subject to capital punishment, but she may be

kept in confinement until she recants. Divorce in this instance is virtually automatic.

In Islamic law or *Shari’ah* blasphemy is punishable by death and this is accepted practice in many Muslim countries. In others, apostates or converts to other religions are subjected to imprisonment and torture.

However this does not simply apply to those who live in countries recognising that law. The English writer, Salman Rushdie, was sentenced to death for writing his book *The Satanic Verses* and a *fatwa* (a pronouncement from a religious leader) was issued from the Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran calling for his execution, an event which to date has not taken place.

The modern Christian mind would grieve at someone who once professed faith in Christ now rejecting him. However the understanding is that only God himself has the right to judge such people. Christians may be moved to pray for the return of the lost to the fold but there is no imperative to punish or threaten apostates for making the break.

Within the teachings of Jesus there are two great stories that reveal the desire of God that all straying believers might return to a state of living as disciples of Jesus. These stories are the Parable of the Lost Sheep (Matt 18.10-14, Luke 15.3-7) and the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15.11-32). Although all humanity must ultimately stand before God to face judgement, God’s nature is revealed as one of deep love for his human creation.

Sadly Christianity has at times found itself corrupted by the attitudes of the day, the most spectacular and tragic example being the period of the Inquisition in the late Middle ages. Here Christian belief became equated with conformity to a church-state power base which saw any deviation as a threat. Thousands died as a result of persecution, a fact that shows ironically how much the human spirit has longed for freedom of the conscience. However out of this the modern western attitude towards the secular society emerged, a view that accepts that “real Christianity” is a personal journey through life in company with the Lord Jesus Christ.