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A Nobody Trying to Tell Everybody About Somebody,

Pastor Mark Driscoll

Jesus in Mormonism and Islam

A research brief prepared by a research team

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I. What is a Cult?

In discussing other religions, the word 'cult' comes into view quite frequently. However, its use can often be problematic, as most people associate cults with Kool-Aid drinking people in funny outfits being brainwashed by a leader and eventually committing suicide. This connotation is unhelpful when one refers to a mildly intelligent person of a different faith as belonging to a cult. As a result, it is important to figure out exactly what is meant by a cult. There are two extremes in the types of definitions offered by those who study theology. For instance, the admittedly liberal Charles Braden said the following: "By the term cult I mean nothing derogatory to any group so classified. A cult, as I define it, is any religious group which differs significantly in one or more respects as to belief or practice from those religious groups which are regarded as the normative expressions of religion in our total culture."¹ This loose definition speaks more of the fact of deviation from 'cultural belief' than of a judgment about the deviation. On the other end of the spectrum is Walter Martin, who adds to Braden's definition: "a cult might also be defined as a group of people gathered about a specific person or person's misinterpretation of the Bible."² Elsewhere he gives a broader definition of a cult: "A cult, then, is a group of people polarized around someone's interpretation of the Bible and is characterized by major deviations from orthodox Christianity relative to the cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith, particularly the fact that God became man in Jesus Christ."³ This definition, of course, tends to make all systems of belief that are not Christianity out to be cults. Is there a better way forward than these two extreme definitions?

It seems that because of the pluralistic culture in which we live and because of the extremely negative connotations with the term 'cult,' it is better to follow the Reformed orthodox in

¹ Charles Braden, *These Also Believe* (MacMillan, 2000), xii.

² Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults* (Bethany House, 2003), 17.

³ Walter Martin, *The Rise of Cults* (Vision House, 1978), 12.

describing levels of doctrinal error. As Richard Muller notes, “The Reformed orthodox generally also note, in connection with the idea of fundamental articles, three kinds of doctrinal error: (1) errors directly against a fundamental article; (2) errors around a fundamental or an indirect contradiction to it; (3) errors beyond a fundamental article. The first kind of error is a direct attack—such as those launched by the Socinians—against the divinity of Christ or the Trinity. The second is not a direct negation or an antithesis but rather an indirect or secondary error ultimately subversive of a fundamental—such as a belief in God that refuses to acknowledge his providence. The third category of error does not address fundamental articles directly or indirectly but rather involves faith in problematic and curious questions that do not arise out of the revealed Word—hay and stubble!—and that, because of their curiosity and vanity, constitute diversions from and impediments to salvation.”⁴ On this view, ‘cults’ would fall under level 1 errors.

Origins of “Cult”

The *Oxford English Dictionary*⁵ indicates that the English word “cult” was first used in a theological controversy in the early 1600s that emerged out of King James I instituting the Oath of Allegiance (1606), which declared that the Pope of the Catholic Church had no authority over the King and his rule.⁶ In its earliest usages, though, the word “cult” did not carry the pejorative connotation that it does today. Instead it simply meant “Worship; reverential homage rendered to a divine being or beings” and “A particular form or system of religious worship; esp. in reference to its external rites and ceremonies.” (Etymologically, our word “cult” is derived from the Latin *cultus*, which means worship, a form of the Latin verb *colere*, meaning to cultivate, attend to, or respect). This non-pejorative meaning of “cult” is still present in most other dictionaries today.⁷

⁴ Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, 2nd ed., vol 1: Prolegomena to Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 422-423.

⁵ www.oed.com

⁶ Specifically, in Samuel Collins’ (1617) work *Epphata to F. T.; or, The Defence of the Bishop of Elie Concerning His Answer to Cardinall Bellarmine’s Apologie*. II. ix. 371, 380. Samuel Collins (1576-1651) was an English clergyman, theologian, and Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge University. This work was a response to a theological treatise by Thomas Fitzherbert (1552-1640), an English Jesuit.

⁷ For example, four out of five of the definitions for “cult” from *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* (2003) do not have any negative connotations: (1) formal religious veneration; worship; (2) a system of religious beliefs and ritual; also its body of adherents; (3) a religion regarded as unorthodox or spurious; also its body of adherents [*note: this definition is somewhat negative*]; (4) a system for the cure of disease based on dogma set forth by its promulgator, as in health cults; (5a) great devotion to a person, idea, object, movement, or work (as a film or book); especially such devotion regarded as a literary or intellectual fad; (5b) the object of such devotion; (5c) a usually small group of people characterized by such devotion.

Similarly, five out of eight of the definitions for “cult” from www.dictionary.com lack any negative connotations: (1) a particular system of religious worship, especially with reference to its rites and ceremonies; (2) an instance of great veneration of a person, ideal, or thing, especially as manifested by a body of admirers: the physical fitness cult; (3) the object of such devotion; (4) a group or sect bound together by veneration of the same thing, person, ideal, etc.; (5) Sociology: a group having a sacred ideology and a set of rites centering around their sacred symbols; (6) a religion or sect considered to be false, unorthodox, or extremist, with members often living outside of conventional society under the direction of a charismatic leader [*negative*]; (7) the members of such a religion or sect [*negative*]; (8) any

“Cult” Enter Sociology

In sociology, the question of what exactly constitutes a cult started with “the church-sect typology” ([1912] 1992) by German Protestant theologian Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923). In short, Troeltsch posited three fundamental types of religious behavior: (1) churchly, (2) sectarian, and (3) mystical.⁸ Troeltsch’s work was not translated into English until 1931, and so the church-sect typology was actually introduced to English-speaking audiences not from Troeltsch, but from the work of another sociologically inclined theologian, namely, H. Richard Niebuhr’s (1929) classic *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*. In this work, Niebuhr revised Troeltsch’s church-sect typology by treating “church” and “sect” not merely as Weberian “ideal types” (that is, discrete conceptual categories) but as *poles of a continuum*. Unlike Troeltsch, Niebuhr’s concern was not merely to classify religious groups but rather to analyze the process of *religious history* as groups moved along this continuum. (For example, Christianity was once considered a sect of Judaism.)

Howard Becker (1932) was the first American trained as a sociologist to use and extend church-sect theory. Aiming to increase the specificity of the continuum, Becker divided “church” into “denomination” and “ecclesia,” and he divided “sect” into “sect” and “cult.” This resulted in the following continuum: cult-sect-denomination-ecclesia. (J. Milton Yinger, in *Religion in the Struggle for Power* [1946], later extended Becker’s four point-continuum into six—namely: cult, sect, established sect, class church/denomination, ecclesia, and universal church.)⁹ As Campbell (1998: 122) explains, Becker’s use of the word “cult” stressed “the private, personal character of the adherents’ beliefs and the amorphous nature of the organization.” This usage of “cult” caught on in sociology such that—instead of reading it with reference to Troeltsch’s original three-point typology, which basically equated to how well-established a religious group was—the term came to refer to any relatively small group “whose beliefs and practices were merely deviant from the perspective of religious or secular orthodoxy,” along with “a very loose organizational structure” (ibid.). This, in short, is how the term “cult” came to enter the discipline of sociology and began its trend toward indicating not just “worship,” but negatively connoted deviant religious groups.

3 Kinds of Definitions

The term “cult” has typically been defined in three related but analytically distinct ways: sociological, theological, and popular sensationalist (Tucker 1989: 17; Richardson 1993). Enroth et al. (1983: 12) provide a brief overview of this distinction:

system for treating human sickness that originated by a person usually claiming to have sole insight into the nature of disease, and that employs methods regarded as unorthodox or unscientific [*negative*].

⁸ This third type is now generally dropped from consideration, since it is seen as being part of a separate bipolar religious typology, namely, between asceticism and mysticism (see Swatos 1998: 90)—although one might consider what is now called “spiritual but not religious” as fitting into this third type. Note also that there are many methodological and substantive parallels between Troeltsch’s church-sect typology and earlier works by Max Weber (1864-1920), one of the three founding fathers of sociology.

⁹ As Swatos (1998: 91) explains: “A number of critics denounced [the entire church-sect project] as meaningless or, at best, woefully inadequate to systematic investigation of the empirical world. Church-sect theorizing has been criticized as ambiguous and vague, lacking precise definitions, unsuited to tests for validity and reliability, merely descriptive rather than explanatory, less informative than other possible approaches, historically and geographically restricted, and unrelated to the rest of sociological theory. Despite all of these criticisms, however, the theoretical framework into which church-sect has evolved has allowed a tremendous amount of data to be organized and reported.”

A sensational approach to cults is built on journalistic accounts in the popular press, which frequently focus on the dramatic and sometimes bizarre aspects of cultic behavior. A sociological definition includes the authoritarian, manipulative, totalistic and sometimes communal features of cults. A theological definition involves some standard of orthodoxy.

Sociological Definition

Richardson (1978: 31) defines a cult as:

...a small informal group lacking a definite authority structure, somewhat spontaneous in its development (although often possessing a somewhat charismatic leader or group of leaders), transitory, somewhat mystical and individualistically oriented, and deriving its inspiration and ideology from outside the predominant religious culture.

Johnson (2000: 69) gives another sociological definition of “cult,” describing it as:

...a particular structural type of religious institution. Membership is predominantly lower class and usually gained through conversion, often during an emotional crisis that joining a cult is seen to resolve. Unlike other religious institutions, cults tend to be short-lived, primarily because of their social structure—an informal, loose organization formed around a single leader’s charismatic authority; highly emotional services that lack formalized ritual; and a retreatist, hostile orientation to major social institutions. Virtually all major religions began as cults, including Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity.

Tucker (1989: 16) offers a quasi-sociological definition from an explicitly Christian perspective:

A ‘cult’ is a religious group that has a ‘prophet’-founder [putatively] called of God to give a special message not found in the Bible itself, often apocalyptic in nature and often set forth in ‘inspired’ writings. In deference to this charismatic figure or these ‘inspired’ writings, the style of leadership is authoritarian and there is frequently an exclusivistic outlook, supported by a legalistic lifestyle and persecution mentality.

Theological Definitions

Theological definitions of cults are similar to sociological definitions but instead of only including social factors (in an attempt to be nonpartisan), theological definitions add the feature of being contrary to some other specific, usually widely accepted, religious ideology held to be orthodox. For example, the ESV Study Bible (2008: 2631) defines a cult as:

...any religious movement that claims to be derived from the Bible and/or the Christian faith, and that advocates beliefs that differ so significantly with major Christian doctrines that two consequences follow: (1) The movement cannot legitimately be considered a valid “Christian” denomination because of its serious deviation from historic Christian orthodoxy. (2) Believing the doctrines of the movement is incompatible with trusting in the Jesus Christ of the Bible for the salvation that comes by God’s grace alone.

In extreme cases, some insists that “cults” cannot be defined by social factors at all—and instead must only consider theology. For example, Alan Gomes of Talbot School of Theology posits that a meaningful sociological definition of “cult” is impossible. Therefore, he claims (1995: 47-48):

...cults must be defined theologically, not behaviorally; examining the group’s doctrinal system is the only way to determine whether it is a cult. Sociology is useful, but cannot be the basis on which cults are defined... Value judgments and religious truth claims fall in the realm of theology, philosophy, and ethics—areas in which sociologists have no particular expertise. (quoted in Enroth 2005: 13)

Popular Sensationalist Definitions

From within academic sociology, Robbins and Anthony (1982: 283) delineate the more popular and sensationalist definition of cult as follows:

...certain manipulative and authoritarian groups which allegedly employ mind control and pose a threat to mental health are universally labeled cults. These groups are usually (1) authoritarian in their leadership; (2) communal and totalistic in their organization; (3) aggressive in their proselytizing; (4) systematic in their programs of indoctrination; (5) relatively new and unfamiliar in the United States; (6) middle class in their clientele.

Tucker (1989: 15), from a Christian perspective, explains the problem of popular sensationalist understandings of cults:

The word “cult” has unfortunately become a pejorative term that sometimes reflects more on the speaker’s attitude than on the subject being spoken about, and it is a word that is of questionable value in studying religious groups that have developed in recent generations outside the beliefs of historic Christian orthodoxy. Nevertheless, it is a word that has become part of our vocabulary and it is difficult to deal with the subject of unorthodox religious movements without making use of it.

Ellwood (1986: 218-222) attempts to integrate the scholarly sociological approach to defining “cult” with the popular sensationalist meaning of the term, resulting in the following definition:

(1) A group that “presents a distinct alternative to dominant patterns within the society in fundamental areas of religious life.” This includes a small size with “distinctly different” forms of belief and practice, carried on by a uniquely organized group. (2) Possessing “strong authoritarian and charismatic leadership.” (3) Oriented toward “inducing powerful subjective experiences and meeting personal needs.” (4) Is “separatist in that it strives to maintain distinct boundaries between it and the ‘outside,’” and “requiring a high degree of conformity and commitment.” (5) A tendency “to see itself as legitimated by a long tradition of wisdom or practice of which it is the current manifestation.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Ellwood (1986: 217) argues that, “the word cult is so intimately intertwined with the popular connotations the word has acquired as to make it, in my view, ultimately undesirable. The label has too often been used to isolate groups in a priori theological or social grounds and then endow them with a wide range of characteristics associated in the user’s mind with cults.” Ironically, in place of the term “cult,” Ellwood (1986: 223) recommends the phrase “emergent religion.”

New Religious Movements

Since the mid-1990s, because of the negative if not pejorative connotations of the popular understandings of cults, sociologists of religion have intentionally used the phrase “new religious movement” instead of “cult” (see, e.g., Dawson [1998] 2006, 2003; Lewis 2004; Daschke and Ashcraft 2005). This new category of contemporary religious phenomena, amorphous as it still is (Bromley 1998; Introvigne 2001), allows scholars to speak and write in less normatively charged ways. As Introvigne (2001) explains:

British sociologist Eileen Barker popularized the use of ‘new religious movements,’ a value-free term much more palatable to scholars than ‘cults’ or ‘sects.’ Later, ‘new religions’ was also used in order to designate the largest and most established among the newer religions, most of them tracing their origins in the 19th century, such as the Mormons or the Jehovah’s Witnesses.

According to Bromley (1998), to varying degrees, new religious movements:

...are nontraditional and nonimmigrant religious groups, began with first-generation converts as their primary membership base, attracted among their converts higher status young adults, manifest social movement characteristics and may present an anomalous profile with respect to traditional, mainstream religious organization and belief, and proclaim themselves to be in search of spiritual enlightenment, personal development, or contact with immanent/transcendent forces, entities, or knowledge.

This new category usually includes what were previously understood as both cults and sects and as such is no easier to define than “cult.” This new framework for studying cults does, however, expand the possibility that religious groups can move over time along the church-sect continuum, for example, from cult or sect to denomination and from denomination to cult or sect.

NOTEWORTHY RELATED COMMENTARY

Burk, Denny. “Is Mormonism a Cult?” Denny Burk: A Commentary on Theology, Politics, and Culture. October 10, 2011.¹¹

Hagerty, Barbara Bradley. “Despite Divide, Evangelicals Could Support A Mormon.” National Public Radio. October 12, 2011.¹²

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Mouw, Richard J. “My Take: This Evangelical Says Mormonism Isn’t a Cult.” CNN Belief Blog. October 9, 2011.ⁱⁱⁱ

Obeidallah, Dean. “Who Says Mormons Aren’t Christians?” CNN Opinion. October 12, 2011.^{iv}

¹¹ <http://www.dennyburk.com/is-mormonism-a-cult/>

¹² <http://www.npr.org/2011/10/12/141269923/despite-divide-evangelicals-could-support-a-mormonMy>

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II. Jesus Christ in Mormonism

A. Introduction

*The classical Christian doctrine of God, on the Mormon view, was basically a cultural capitulation (notably, this view has been debunked by scholars such as Richard Baukham, Simon Gathercole, and Larry Hurtado, among others): “There is nothing surprising or novel in religious groups developing theological ideas in new directions. Early Christians, for example, took Jewish religious traditions of God, creation, sin, the fall, redemption, a savior figure, resurrection, and a people of God, and reconfigured them all in relation to Jesus of Nazareth identified as savior and lord. Christianity also brought a very open boundary to that previously, largely controlled community of Jews and talked not only about a spirit power that qualified people for inclusion but also asserted the belief that the resurrection had already begun in the person of Jesus. It was not long before a variety of other ideas, especially Greek ideas, helped ongoing generations of Christians to express their growing sense that Jesus was also divine and needed to be included in a new view of God as a Holy Trinity. The early Christian idea that Christ would soon return to transform the world was itself transformed into an ongoing commitment to develop and expand the Christian community itself.”*¹³

B. The Mormon Doctrine of God

*The Mormon Scriptures do reference Jesus Christ as the Son of God (Helaman 5:12; 3 Nephi 14:24-6; Mosiah 3:8), and their Articles of Faith open with the assertion that Jesus Christ is the Son of God the Eternal Father. Indeed, the Mormon doctrine of God is often confusing to Christians because it uses the language that is familiar to them but means something different by it. “The Articles open with the assertion: ‘We believe in God, the Eternal Father, and in His Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost.’ This simple affirmation echoes the doctrine of the Trinity, which gradually became the mark of orthodoxy during the first four hundred years of Christianity and sets the mark for all subsequent debates about the nature of God. Whilst reflecting early Christian creeds the affirmation does not express the rationale of LDS thought, especially its later development, for it does not operate on the same philosophical principles. Though some LDS writers have tried to describe LDS accounts of God in relation to the official creeds of Christendom, the venture is seldom fruitful, because the worlds of thought and of ritual action associated with them are markedly different (Hale 1989: 7–14). In fact, the LDS approach to God is not always easy for members of other Christian denominations to grasp, because of the distinctive value given to the relative status of ‘God’, ‘Father’ and ‘Son’. Jesus Christ, for example, is identified with the Old Testament figure of Jehovah and was the God of Israel. This immediately draws a distinction between LDS and most other Christian traditions, which would identify the God of the Hebrews as ‘the Father’, and Jesus as the Father’s Son.”*¹⁴

What exactly do Mormon’s mean by ‘Father’? “At the outset, the very word ‘Father’ demands close attention. Many ordinary Christians would, in popular terms and in practical spirituality,

¹³ Douglas J. Davies, *An Introduction to Mormonism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 35.

¹⁴ Davies, *An Introduction to Mormonism*, 67.

identify God the Father with the God of the Old Testament, often referred to as Jehovah. For them the link between Father and Jehovah is assumed and they would not anticipate the counter-intuitive LDS view that equates Jesus with Jehovah. For ordinary Christians, it is important to stress this fact: in Mormon terms Jesus is Jehovah and Jehovah is not the Father. In Mormon terminology the source responsible for all spirits, including that of Jesus, is Elohim. This Hebrew plural noun of majesty or intensity is usually used with a verb in the singular and, biblically, describes the single identity of God the Father. In the opinion of Latter-day Saints and in their traditional ritual, however, Elohim becomes particularly important in relation to creation stories, in which it is given a full plural designation—the Gods (Abraham 4: 1). This marks a clear distinction from historical Christian doctrine.”¹⁵

What exactly do Mormons mean when they say that Jesus is the ‘Son of God’? Well, they take it quite literalistically: “More traditionally, perhaps, Jesus is taken to be the ‘Son of God’, and this in the most direct sense of God the Father engaging with Mary to engender his Son. This allows Latter-day Saints to speak of the divine and the human nature in Jesus without becoming involved in the technical debates of the early period of Christian history. The Articles of Faith, for example, do not refer to the human and divine natures of Jesus, nor yet to his mother being a virgin, nor to a virgin birth. Brigham Young was clear on the subject, ‘the Being whom we call Father was the Father of the spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ, and he was also his Father pertaining to the flesh. Infidels and Christians, make all you can of this statement’: Mary was impregnated by God the Father to produce Jesus in the same way as Brigham’s father had sired him (Young 1992:127,137).”¹⁶

However, the Mormon description of Jesus becomes more complicated. “To make the situation slightly more complex, however, there are occasions when Jesus is called ‘The Father’ and this association is only partially resolved by arguing that this is when his own ‘Father’ decides that Jesus should represent him (see Vogel 1989:22–23). In this representative role Jesus may be called ‘Father’ by human beings even though, in general, when Latter-day Saints speak of God as ‘Heavenly Father’ their prime reference is to God the Father. This becomes very clear in one of the very few set church prayers used at the sacrament service, as described in chapter 7.”¹⁷

Again, quite literally, Jesus is God the Father’s actual son. “In more formal terms, God the Father, or ‘God the Eternal Father’ as he is often addressed in worship, is particularly important because, along with a heavenly mother figure, he is the source of all spirit children. Jesus, too, was produced as a spirit child in this way in the pre-existent world prior to his taking a human body through Mary, in a human birth that was the outcome of a form of union between Mary and the Eternal Father. As the Prophet Ezra Taft Benson explained it: ‘Jesus was not the son of Joseph, nor was he begotten by the Holy Ghost. He is the Son of the Eternal Father’ (1983: 4, cited by Millet 1992: 725).”¹⁸

Because of all of this, Mormons prefer to talk of the Godhead as opposed to the Trinity: “As far as the LDS doctrine of the godhead is concerned—and ‘Godhead’ is a term much preferred over

¹⁵ Davies, *An Introduction to Mormonism*, 67-68.

¹⁶ Davies, *An Introduction to Mormonism*, 69.

¹⁷ Davies, *An Introduction to Mormonism*, 69.

¹⁸ Davies, *An Introduction to Mormonism*, 70.

‘Trinity’—much is driven by Joseph Smith’s first vision, when he was fourteen years of age. Joseph described a great pillar of light in which two divine beings came to him: the one was assumed to be God the Father because he called the other his Son. It is precisely because these two ‘personages’, as they are usually called, were perceived by Joseph to be distinct entities that Mormonism set itself on the path to a notion of godhead which some stress as being twofold but others as threefold, albeit with the qualification that two of the three possessed actual bodies. This visionary presence of Jesus is at least as important as the doctrine of the Incarnation as the foundation for belief in the divine engagement with human bodies.”¹⁹

Interestingly, in Mormon theology, Jesus was a polygamist: “One minor aspect of early LDS thought, or perhaps it might better be called speculation, and one that is rarely formally discussed today, is the idea that Jesus did, in fact, marry, and that he married both Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus, whom he raised from the dead (see Buerger 1994: 67; Kraut 1969). This idea would probably be viewed as impious by many ordinary Christian traditions, not simply because the Bible says nothing about it, but because marriage, sex and sin often seem to combine in a negative way in everyday Christian mentality, despite theological protestations to the contrary, and Christians do not associate Jesus with sin of any sort. In LDS spirituality, however, sexuality is largely positive and in early Mormonism marriage, especially plural marriage, became the route to exaltation rather than to hell.”

Put most simply, “Mormons, as we have seen, identify Christ with Jehovah. Jehovah existed prior to his incarnation as the ‘first-born’ of the myriads of pre-existent spirits. The following statements from James Talmadge, in his *Articles of Faith*, make this clear: ‘Among the spirit-children of Elohim the firstborn was and is Jehovah or Jesus Christ to whom all others are juniors’ (p. 471). ‘Jesus Christ is not the Father of the spirits who have taken or yet shall take bodies upon this earth, for He is one of them. He is The Son as they are sons or daughters of Elohim’ (pp. 472-73). Not also the following statements from *Doctrine and Covenants*: ‘And now, verily I say unto you, I was in the beginning with the Father, and am the First-born; And all those who are begotten through me are partakers of the glory of the same, and are the church of the First-born. Yet were also in the beginning with the Father... (93:21-23).’ From these statements it is evident that, for Mormons, the only difference between Christ and us is that Christ was the first-born of Elohim’s children, whereas we, in our pre-existence, were ‘born’ later. The distinction between Christ and us is therefore one of degree, not one of kind.”²⁰

However, this system of belief has some undesirable consequences: “If the devil and the demons were also spirit-children of Elohim, it must follow that they, too, are Jesus’ brothers. This is exactly what one Mormon writer says: ‘As for the Devil and his fellow spirits, they are brothers to man and also to Jesus and sons and daughters of God in the same sense that we are.’ One could therefore even say that, for Mormons, the difference between Christ and the devil is not one of kind, but of degree!”²¹

¹⁹ Davies, *An Introduction to Mormonism*, 70-71.

²⁰ Anthony Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eermands Pub. Co., 1963), 53-54. For further refutation, see Andrew Jackson, *Mormonism Explains: What Latter-Day Saints Teach and Practice* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

²¹ Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults*, 54.

Or further, “From the foregoing it has already become evident that in Mormon theology Jesus Christ is basically not any more divine than any one of us. We have previously noted that Mormons deny the Holy Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, so they teach, are not one God but three gods. It remains further to note that Christ is not considered equal to the Father: ‘Jesus is greater than the Holy Spirit, which is subject unto him, but his Father is greater than he.’ Though it is said that Christ ‘created’ this earth under the Father’s direction, it is also said that certain pre-existence spirits, like Adam and Joseph Smith, helped him. Further confirming Mormonism’s denial of the essential deity of Christ is the following statement by Mormon elder B. H. Roberts: ‘The divinity of Jesus is the truth which now requires to be re-perceived...the divinity of Jesus and [the divinity] of all other noble and saintly souls, insofar as they, too, have been inflamed by a spark of Deity—insofar as they, too, can be recognized as manifestations of the Divine.’ When we recall the goal of Mormon eschatology is for man to attain godhood, we conclude that the Christ of Mormonism is a far cry from the Christ of the Scriptures. Neither his divinity nor his incarnation are unique. His divinity is not unique, for it is the same as that to which man may attain. His incarnation is not unique, for it is no different from that of other gods before him, who were incarnated on other earths; nor is it different from that of man, who also was a pre-existent spirit before he was incarnated on this earth.”²²

III. Jesus Christ in Islam

A. Islamic Beliefs About Jesus

Muslims view Christians as tritheists because of their belief in the Trinity: “In fact, the Qur'an itself declares in Surah 5:73 (see also 4:171) that Christians believe in three gods, and that this is blasphemy against Allah. Islam arose in the Christian era, when theologians and laity still hotly debated the great Trinitarian formulas. Some Christians were teaching heretical notions of the Trinity in Mecca, where Muhammad lived. One such heresy claimed something like this: God has a wife named Mary, with whom he had intercourse, resulting in Jesus.”²³

Some try to downplay the distinctions between Muslim and Christian belief about Christ, but this is not wise nor charitable. “The conflict between Islam and Christianity is reflected in numerous disputes and apologetic writings on both sides. The tension between the two religions was enhanced by the fact that the Koran contains several references to the life of Jesus which, of course, are accepted by Muslims as absolute and indisputable truth as they constitute God’s own word, while they contradict Christian dogma on certain points.”²⁴

Put most simply, “The Koran acknowledges the virgin birth. Jesus is the Word which God placed into Mary. This, however, does not mean that he should be called ‘God’s Son.’ Rather, he is the last great prophet before Muhammad, a healer and a model of love, poverty, and humility, who never thought of claiming divine status. Mary—thus says Islamic tradition—is one of the four

²² Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults*, 54.

²³ Timothy George, “Is the God of Muhammad the Father of Jesus?” *Christianity Today* 46, no. 2 (Feb. 2002).

²⁴ Annemarie Schimmel, *Islam: An Introduction* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), 73.

best women that ever lived on earth. In contrast to other children of Adam she was not touched by Satan.”²⁵

Jesus, on the Koran’s view, did miracles: “The Koran mentions only fragments from the life of Jesus. There, as in later traditions, scenes known from apocryphal writings are echoed, such as his capacity to grant life to clay birds by breathing upon them. This, incidentally, forms the basis for an image used thousands of times in Persian, Arabic, Turkish, and Urdu poetry: the breath or the kiss of the beloved is compared to the life-bestowing breath of Jesus: ‘Jesus-breathed’ means simply ‘healing, live-giving.’”²⁶

“But in the Koran, the crucifixion is not accepted: ‘They did not kill him and did not crucify him, rather one was made resembling him (*Sura* 4.157).’ Hence, the central importance of the Cross in Christian faith is never properly understood by a Muslim, even less so the need for redemption is acknowledged, because Islam does not know the concept of original sin. According to the teaching of the modern Ahmadiyya sect, Jesus wandered to Kashmir after someone else had been crucified in his place; his tomb is taken to be near Srinagar where he died at a great age. With this attitude, the Ahmadiyya takes a position that is unacceptable for both Christians and Muslims.”²⁷

In the Quran, Jesus is most certainly only a human prophet. Jesus’s “speech and the divine pronouncements concerning him seem to echo the prophetic career of Muhammad himself, or else seem designed to show that he is ‘merely’ a servant of God—that is, a human being—who does not disdain that status. There is no Sermon on the Mount, no parables, no teachings on the law and the spirit, and of course no Passion. Instead, he has his faithful disciples who believe in him, he is humble and pious toward his mother, and he bears a message of God’s unity which confirms earlier prophetic messages. But the clear bulk of references to Jesus come in the form of divine pronouncements which speak about him or on his behalf, passages that remind Jesus himself or mankind in general that God is the ultimate creator and master of life and destiny of Jesus, as of all Creation. Here, then, is the true Jesus, ‘cleansed’ of the ‘perversions’ of his followers, a prophet totally obedient to his Maker and offered up as the true alternative to the Jesus of the Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Redemption.”²⁸

With all that Islam teaches about Jesus, their strict monotheism will not allow for the worship of any other God. As one Muslim writer put it, “Muslims respect and revere Jesus (peace be upon him). They consider him one of the greatest of God’s messengers to mankind. The Quran confirms his virgin birth, and a chapter of the Quran is entitled ‘Maryam’ (Mary; Quran, 3:45-47) ...Jesus was born miraculously by the command of God, the same command that had brought Adam into being with neither a father nor a mother (Quran, 3:59). During his prophetic mission, Jesus performed many miracles (Quran, 3:49). Muslims believe that Jesus was not crucified. It was the plan of Jesus’ enemies to crucify him, but God saved him and raised him up to Him. And the likeness of Jesus was put over another man. Jesus’ enemies took this man and

²⁵ Schimmel, *Islam*, 73.

²⁶ Schimmel, 74.

²⁷ Schimmel, 74.

²⁸ Tarif Khalidi, *The Muslim Jesus: Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 15.

crucified him, thinking that he was Jesus (Quran, 4:157). Neither Muhammad nor Jesus came to change the basic doctrine of the belief in one God, brought by earlier prophets, but rather to confirm and renew it.”²⁹

B. The Quran on Jesus

All Muslims believe Jesus was born of a virgin and that he was a great prophet--yet he was only a man. They believe he was sent by God to help people obey God. Islam claims Jesus spoke as a baby, healed the sick, and raised the dead. The Quran refers to Jesus as the breath of God, the spirit of God, the life of God and the word of God. Muslims do not think Jesus died on the cross. They believe that right before he was to be killed, God took him up to heaven and someone else (probably Judas) replaced him on the cross. They trust that Jesus will return to the earth again to usher in the final judgment from God and confirm that Islam is the true and final religion for all humankind.

Muslims think Christians believe in three gods: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Mother (Mary). They believe that Christians and Jews have changed the Bible; therefore, although the Quran acknowledges the Gospel of Christ, the Torah of Moses and the Psalms of David, the existing copies can't be trusted. In any case, they are all superseded by the Quran.

It's strange that while Muslims think Jesus was only a man -- a prophet superseded by Muhammad -- at the same time the Qur'an teaches that Jesus Christ was the Messiah, the Word of God, a speaker of truth, a sign unto men of mercy from God. It teaches that Jesus was virgin born, sinless, performed supernatural miracles (including raising people from the dead), and bodily ascended into heaven. All of this is affirmed of Jesus Christ in the Quran. The crucial thing Muslims don't believe is that Jesus died on the cross for our sins and rose from the dead. One must emphasize to the Muslim that the Jesus of the New Testament claimed to be God, not just a prophet. Jesus said, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30). In John 8:58 Jesus said to some Jews, "Before Abraham was, I am," thereby claiming to be God (cf. Exod. 3:14). He received worship on many different occasions. One of His disciples bowed before Him and said, "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28), acknowledging His full deity. Jesus forgave sins, which only God can do (Mark 2:5-7). Jesus resurrected people from the dead, which only God has the power to do (John 11:38-44). So, Jesus in many different ways is shown to be God, not just a prophet. The Bible and the Qur'an are irreconcilable on these ideas.

The Quran bears surprising witness to Jesus. It affirms His virgin birth, His ability to heal and raise the dead, that He is both a word from God and a spirit from God, that He is the Messiah, an all-righteous one (sinless), among those nearest to God, that He is alive in heaven now and will return to judge the earth (Quran 3:45, 49; 4:158; 82:22). Muslims often are convinced that Christ is greater than Muhammad from just reading the Quran.

²⁹ <http://www.islam-guide.com/ch3-10.htm>

Indeed, in our effort to bring Muslims to study the Bible, we have an unexpected ally in Muhammad's book, the Quran. In a careful reading of Quranic references (3:84; 5:51, 71; 6:34; 10:37, 64, 94; 46:12), we find that Muhammad affirmed his belief in what was revealed to Moses and Jesus. He taught that God confirms and guards all previous scripture, that Christians are to stand fast on their own books of the Law and the Gospel, and that none could change the Word of God. Finally, the Muslim is told that if he has doubts he should ask the Jews and Christians, who were reading the Holy Books before he was.

In Quran 7:158, Muhammad asked people to follow Jesus. Elsewhere in the Quran, Muhammad testified that Jesus was among those nearest to God, held in honor in this world and the hereafter (Quran 3:45). Muslims understand this to mean that Jesus was sinless and all-righteous, something that the early Muslims never claimed for Muhammad. In fact, in several Quranic passages (16:61; 40:55; 42:5, 30; 47:19; 48:1-2) we read that Muhammad was exhorted to seek forgiveness for his faults, that not a single living creature would be left on earth if God punished everyone for their wrongdoing, and that one of Muhammad's military victories served as an assurance of forgiveness of his sins, past and future. It is pointless for Muslims to argue for Muhammad's sinlessness or to compare him to Jesus, whom Muslims consider to be both sinless and alive in heaven, near to God right now. The contrast could be more sharply drawn by pointing out that Muhammad's grave is in Medina today, whereas Christ is alive in heaven with God.

In the Quran (2:253; 3:45-49; 4:158, 171; 5:49; 19:33; 89:22) it is noted that Jesus was called the Messiah; He was born of a virgin; He was among the righteous ones -- those nearest to God; He received strength from the Holy Spirit; He could give sight to the blind, cure lepers, and raise the dead; He prophesied His own death and resurrection; He was called a Word from God and a Spirit from God; and finally, He is coming back with thousands of angels to judge the world. All these characterizations add up to a powerful picture of a Christ who was more than a prophet, and -- on Quranic terms alone -- superior to Muhammad.

The Quran exhorts Muhammad (and others, too) to seek forgiveness of his sins (Q. 40:55; 42:5; 47:19). The universality of sin is mentioned in Quran 16:61. The Quran also says that whatever misfortune happens to a Muslim happens because of his sin (Q. 42:30). It further says that even when victory comes it occurs so that God may forgive one's sins (Q. 48:1, 2). From these verses, one can demonstrate that no one is sinless or capable of being the "Light of the World." The big exception, of course, is Jesus. Even in the Quran, we read that he is "among the righteous ones," that is, sinless (Q. 3:46).

Moving from these Quranic passages, the Christian witness should then be able to show to the Muslim that Jesus is "the holy Son of God" (Matt. 1:20, 21; Luke 1:32); that He was indeed sinless (2 Cor. 5:21); that in Jesus is true spiritual life and this life is the true light of men (John 1:4); and, finally, that Jesus Himself claimed to be the Light of the world (John 8:12) and it is in His light that we see light (John 1:9).

ⁱ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/10/11/rick-perry-robert-jeffress_n_1005638.html?ir=Religion

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- ii <http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2011/10/10/huntsman-pastor-is-a-moron/?iref=obnetwork>
- iii <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2011/10/09/my-take-this-evangelical-says-mormonism-isnt-a-cult/>
- iv <http://www.cnn.com/2011/10/12/opinion/obeidallah-mormon-christian/index.html>