

Christianity and Islam: What Makes the Christian Gospel So Unique

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 03 October 2010

Preacher: John Wilson

[0 : 00] Heavenly Father, we thank you for giving us the scriptures to learn from. And we pray that you would teach us in our hearts and in our minds and help us to live out your word in our lives from day to day.

Amen. It's very good to be here. I'd like to thank Andrew for his welcome. We've come here many times.

We've got some very precious people who worship here and have been so, who had a bit of sickness in our family. And I've just had the end of 10 chemotherapies.

I'm having to get rid of these wheels and due course, God willing. But it's lovely to be back. And of course, there's lots of friends here and we look forward to meeting some new people. So thank you very much.

I wrote this book, Christianity Alongside Islam. And we've got a daughter in America, Susan. We sent her a copy and she asked if I'd send a copy to her mother-in-law in Texas.

[1 : 05] And she's a very keen Methodist. So I sent her a copy and she was going off to a Methodist conference. And when she got there, they were absolutely convinced that they'd seen me and the book on Larry King Live, one of these television shows.

Nothing would shake their confidence that I'd been on Larry King Live. So I'm beginning to believe it myself. And now that Oprah's coming to Australia, I'm expecting to be interviewed by her and be on part of that program.

Last Christmas Day, over the city of Detroit, as a plane was coming from Amsterdam, some alert passengers noticed a young Nigerian.

And he was fiddling around in his pants and they wondered what was going on. And he was trying to mix explosives that he'd brought in his underpants. And the idea was to blow up the plane over the suburbs of Detroit.

And it would kill 300 people on the plane. And also flaming pieces of this airliner would fall into the suburbs and kill more people and no doubt set houses on fire.

[2 : 18] If it had happened, it would have changed Christmas Day, I'm sure, in the United States and, of course, in other places. And people would have wondered whether this was the first in a series such as on 9-11.

And we can be so thankful that that was stopped. And there have been many other such terrorist attacks which have been stopped. And why is it that young men, intelligent young men, often educated young men in particular, get sucked into this kind of thing?

Now, one thing we should say is that the overwhelming number of victims of Islamist violence are Muslims. And we've only got to think of Iraq and Afghanistan and Pakistan and India who have been the people that have died most.

They have been Muslims. And groups like Al-Qaeda, they want to divide the community, set off sectarian strife.

And they seem to have no worry about blowing up mosques and so on. And we know all about this. And in the book, it's one of the questions I try to answer, is why do intelligent young people, in particular, get radicalised to commit such acts of atrocity?

[3 : 46] One of the stories I mention is a book, came out in Penguin in 2007, by a British Muslim, Ed Hussein, the Islamist.

It's called Why I Joined Radical Islam in Britain, What I Saw Inside and Why I Left. He came from a rather gentle kind of Muslim background.

And then he, in London there, he's radicalised, he's targeted, radicalised by a political group. And he tells the, I think it's frightening story of the way in which the mosque in South London is taken over by this group.

And then at the university college, where he's studying, the way in which this group is able to claim more and more space for its activities.

And the authorities of the university are aware of this. They don't know what to do. And there's this rather pathetic response that they give, in that all they can offer is a kind of hedonism, a permissiveness, a consumerism and moral relativism.

[5 : 04] That is the way they think they will attract the members of this Muslim group away from what they're doing. And what it reveals is a spiritual vacuum that exists, where there's nothing.

There's nothing to answer the group who just see them as morally corrupt. And this is one of the things in the West, Western countries, that there is a spiritual vacuum.

And we only have to think of our city of Melbourne here. Some of the things that go on in the way in which alcohol fills a void in people's lives and the way in which celebrity seems to set the moral standard and so on.

There's a vacuum. Now, I started to really study this subject in earnest in 1998. I went to the Lambeth Conference of Anglican bishops.

And we were all divided into groups. There were about 800 bishops there. We were divided into groups of about 10. And I was blessed to be in a group with some bishops from West Africa and from East Africa and from Southeast Asia who were in Muslim-majority countries.

[6 : 25] And all the time during the conference, they were very conscious of the way in which what was going on at the conference would be noted and used back in their homelands and the way in which they came from multi-faith contexts.

Whereas the English and the American bishops, they went on as though, you know, the world is just a secular world and we don't have to worry about these things.

And it concerned me greatly that they did not really listen enough to what these bishops from the developing countries or Asian and African countries were saying.

And so I came home for this and for other reasons determined that I needed to know a lot more about Islam. And we do. Out in the community, there are two attitudes which are not adequate.

There's the attitude that everything Muslim is bad and, you know, it needs to be condemned and so on. And then on the other side, there's the other extreme where, oh, we mustn't raise questions.

[7 : 44] We mustn't raise the hard questions. You know, we must not say too much that would be critical. Well, that's not good enough. We, especially as Christians, need to know a lot more.

And to understand Islam and to understand Christianity for that matter, the essential thing is to understand Muhammad and to understand Jesus.

Why have these two figures, which are undoubtedly the most significant figures in history, in all of history? After all, Muslims number about 20% of the world's population, about one and a half billion people.

And people who call themselves Christians, followers of Jesus, probably number about two and a quarter billion people. Now, we're not saying that every one of those people is a loyal follower of Islam or a loyal follower of Christ.

Even the person who's been elected for the first Muslim to the Australian Parliament, as I heard him say, he's pretty nominal, even though he swore on the Koran the other day in the Parliament.

[8 : 59] But these two influential figures, nevertheless, we have to understand them to really know what is behind these faiths.

Muhammad was born in 570, about, and died in 632. We know him as a religious leader who gave the Koran, the recitation of the Koran to his followers.

But when we look at his life, we can see that he was also a political leader, a statesman, a diplomat, and a military leader of considerable talent.

I have in the book a reproduction of a letter which Muhammad wrote to the Emir of Bahrain, an island in the Persian Gulf.

And you see there, you know, some of his diplomacy and some of the things he was demanding.

And in 630, he returned to Mecca, where he was born, with an army of 10,000.

[10 : 03] And it's no wonder the Meccans who had opposed him capitulated. And so he entered the city and he was able to bring in his reforms, cleanse the Kabah, the temple there, of its idols and

so on, and institute the rule of Islam.

Now, if you read the Koran, and I guess some of you have and I would encourage you to look at it, you would find that it's not like the Bible in the sense of a story, you know, basically a story outline or anything like that.

It is not the story of Muhammad, but different parts of it are linked to incidents in his life. And the Koran is often divided into the portions that were spoken in Mecca and those that were spoken in the northern city, the Oasis city of Bedina.

But outside the Koran, there are thousands of traditions about what Muhammad did, collected in what are the collections of the Hadith.

And you can see through all this that on the one hand, he can be assessed as a peacemaker. And on the other hand, you can be seen as a military leader who proclaimed violent jihad.

[11 : 34] So if you want to take the example of Muhammad, you can take it in very many different ways. And some of these are very particular, like wearing a beard and so on, and attitude to various groups and so on.

And you can take these various examples. But when we look at Jesus, he never held political office or exercised political power.

He was a teacher, a healer. He was one who cared for the poor and the outcast. And he was killed by the Romans who were presented with the charge that this man claimed to be the Messiah.

And we can see in Jesus and the actions that he did and the life that he lived such a great continuity with the words and promises of the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures.

And you can see this. And the remarkable thing about Jesus is the way in which he combined the powerful presence of God with the humility and the suffering of God's servant.

[12 : 45] He is the servant good, the servant king. Now, in the Koran, you will find that Jesus and his mother Mary are greatly honoured.

In fact, Jesus is mentioned in the Koran in 93 verses. I don't know whether you realise that. But he is greatly honoured and he is told to be, we read there that he was a teacher, he was a worker of miracles, he healed the blind, he healed the leper, he even raised the dead.

We read these things in the Koran. But there are no details. There are no stories such as we find in the Gospels. Now, a few months back, I was contacted by the Australian Federal Police.

I wondered what was happening, whether I'd committed some great crime or something. They were after me. But somehow, the Federal Police agent had got hold of my book.

I'm still trying to work out how he got it. It was so early, we think he got it from the printer. But at any rate, he asked me if I would come and speak at an Iftar meal after the Ramadan fast down at a hotel in Albert Park, which I did.

[14 : 10] And there were about 270 there. Quite a few Federal Police so we were all protected. And there were mostly Muslims at this meal.

And I was able to talk about Christianity alongside Islam and how we live together in this Australian community. how we can cooperate and so on and good things and also to try and give a bit of a challenge.

And one of the challenges is that if Christians should be reading the Quran and looking and knowing more about Islam, surely Muslims should be reading the Gospels.

I have the feeling that at the time of Muhammad, maybe the Muslims in Arabia, they knew more of what was in the Gospels. And so, I was challenging, one of my challenges was to be reading the Gospels.

One of the things that you'll find in the Quran that will surprise you, I think shock you in a way, because it is so basic to Christianity and I think it is the most sure thing that happened in history with regard to Jesus.

[15 : 28] In the Quran it says that Jesus was not killed, but that God substituted a look-alike. So, a look-alike was killed in the place of Jesus.

and in Islamic theology this has given a reason because Jesus is such an honoured person that God could not allow such a wonderful person who performs such wonderful miracles and so on to be killed in this terrible way and so he confused people and he took a look-alike and this person was killed.

Now, Professor Laman Sané whom the Archbishop Rainer brought to Melbourne a few years ago, he is a professor of history and Christian mission at Yale University and he grew up as a Muslim in

West Africa, comes from the Gambia and he went to a Muslim boarding school which was pretty strict and there he learnt the Koran as you would at such a school and in learning the Koran he came to this passage where Jesus is not killed but rather a look-alike is in his place and he asked, well, who was this person who was killed instead of Jesus?

How can this be? And it really concerned him. What was God doing? He knew the Islamic theology which said that God could not let an honoured servant like Jesus be killed in this way.

He knew that and yet it worried him. How can another person be put in his place and what does this do to our understanding of God?

[17 : 40] And he began to think, what if it was that Jesus was actually killed in this way by the Romans and by the mob and so on?

Now he had never read a Bible and he knew any Christians at this point of view but he was thinking all the time about this and it was only later that he got a Bible and read Romans and the Acts of the Apostles and so on and began to comprehend what the Bible was saying that God was in Jesus and our understanding of God comes through the cross of Christ so God was in Christ reconciling us to himself he was overwhelmed as he read this by the grace and the love of God he had known tragedy in his own life he tells us and here God was entering first of all into human experience and entering into these terrible events through the cross and also dying for our sins and so on in Islam there is no sacrifice for sins it's regarded as unnecessary there's no atonement as we would know it God just forgives well if you read the Quran he forgives or he does not forgive and the result of this is there's no assurance of salvation now after 9-11 the Archbishop of Canterbury at the time George Carey and the Sheikh of Qatar invited Islamic and Christian scholars to come for a reading together of the scriptures it was part of many efforts including the one that's in the picture on the cover of the book where Archbishop Watson went to the mosque in Preston to try and calm people down because there was such fear at the time anyway there's this conference and Archbishop Watson I think he went to it and the story of the prodigal son was read out and one of the

Islamic scholars said look this is a very Muslim story now why did he say that well he was saying that it's a very Muslim story because the father in the story simply forgave his son and therefore you just forgive there's no atonement in the story now at the conference was the scholar Dr.

Kenneth Bailey Dr. Bailey has lived in the Middle East most of his life and he's written several books on this one chapter chapter 15 of Luke's gospel and in this chapter there are actually three parables three stories the shepherd and the lost sheep the woman and the lost coin and the father and the two lost sons and when you look at these stories and he does in great detail and you go into the details and you see it in the context of the Middle East you see that there are intimations of great cost the shepherd goes out into the wilderness and he finds the sheep it's not like a little puppy that he can nestle in his hands but rather an animal that he has to hoist upon his shoulders and take back to the fold and he shows himself to be a person of responsibility a person of character he will not let the sheep be lost and he seeks to find it and the woman in the lost coin she's not in some like holy trendy

[22 : 22] Doncaster you've got a nice carpet here lovely carpet and you put down a five cent piece you'd easily find it wouldn't you she is in a house with small windows and an earthen floor with lots of cracks in it and the coin is lost easily lodged in one of those cracks in the floor and so she uses all her effort to find the coin which she does she shows she is a woman of responsibility a woman of character who will not allow the coin to be lost and then the father he endures insult from the son and one of the details that Kenneth Bailey brings out is that the inheritance would be in the land and the son sells the land in these villages because it was all take place in a village you know it is passed down from generation to generation and to sell the land to turn it into cash as the son does and probably at a loss because he does it so quickly he has to escape the village because he has to escape the anger of the other villages so he insults his father insults the village goes off and squanders the money and then as you read the story carefully he is destitute in the foreign land and he goes back and if you read it carefully he is working out how to bargain with his father he is going to bargain with his father he will become like one of the hired servants he will learn a trade and then gradually pay back the money to his father and do it this way but the father like no middle eastern gentleman would normally do he sees the sun afar off he runs he bears his legs because he has to raise his robes he bears his legs and races out to the sun and takes hold of him braces him and so on because he wants to stand between the sun and the hostility and the condemnation of the villages and he shows visibly his acceptance of the son and of course as we heard he has a

wonderful party but the other son he won't even come in to the party and he makes the claim well first of all he calls his brother this son of yours he won't even identify the younger son as his brother so it kind of dissociates himself from the one who is his brother and then he says to his father look I've been working like a slave for you all these years when in fact he had been building up his own inheritance and of course the story is left open as David told us it's left open so we wonder what the son will do but this is part of Luke 15 where at the beginning we are told that

Jesus is criticized and condemned because he taught those who were regarded as sinners particularly and they were outcasts they were not wanted and they were the objects of hostility Jesus teaches them and eats with them he shares meals with them what a terrible thing for him to do and so the stories are not only stories about the nature of God which they are God is like the good shepherd and the woman and like the father but they are like Jesus this is what Jesus is doing Jesus stands between the hostility and the condemnation of the Pharisees and so on and takes it into himself and as we read through the gospel of Luke we know that this is why he was crucified because he took upon himself the condemnation the hostility the enmity and so and that belonged to others he is the one who stands in between and so the crucifixion and there are these hints in the stories of Luke 15 the crucifixion is a terrible cost there is an atonement and there is to be well the crucifixion is God's love made visible in Christ there is no cheap forgiveness there is no cheap grace and this is why St.

Paul when he wrote to the Corinthians he said look do not forget don't forget you were bought with a price what is the greatest difference between Christianity and Islam well Islam means submission and what Muhammad revealed was God's law and in the book I quote a Muslim theologian who puts it very clearly he says God does not reveal himself God is so different the idea that we could be made in the image of God that somehow God made us in that way to relate to him you can't have that it is the will of God that is revealed

God is utterly different from us and Islam is submission to that will and quoting from this Muslim theologian he says Christians talk about the revelation of God himself by God of God and that's the way we look at it isn't it that God has revealed himself but that is the great difference this difference this theologian goes on to say between Christianity and Islam it's the will that we might submit not this intimate knowledge of God but when we go to the Bible right from the beginning God is about revealing himself he wants us to know the good things for us to do in life that will be good for us but God wants us to know him not just his will not just about him but he wants us to enter into a fellowship with him so God reveals himself father son and holy spirit the divine fellowship of love which spills over into our lives and seeks to embrace every one of us if we open ourselves to him I'd like to finish with what is one of my favourite passages in the New Testament it's the wonderful prayer of St.

[30 : 35] Paul at the end of Ephesians chapter 3 it's deeply Trinitarian you don't think that the Trinity is there in the scriptures just read this prayer it's a prayer to the Father but it mentions Jesus and the Holy Spirit they all come together in the unity of this prayer and Father Son and Holy Spirit they're not in the prayer external to our lives but they are to dwell they want to dwell among us and the prayer is that they may dwell among us and dwell in us and the prayer is that we may be filled and it's an amazing prayer we may be filled with all the fullness of God with all the fullness of God I mean it's amazing to think about it that God wants this for you and for me and the prayer roots and grounds the Christian life in God's love which we also are to share and which we are to express with one another so let me finish by praying for us this wonderful wonderful prayer for this reason

I bow my knees before the Father from whom every family in heaven on earth takes its name that according to the riches of his glory he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner brain with power through the spirit and that Christ may dwell in your heart through faith as you are being rooted and grounded in love I pray that you may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and height and length and depth and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all that we ask or think to him be glory in the church and in

Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever Amen Andrew I'll make you