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ARE MORMONS AND MUSLIMS APPLES AND ORANGES?: AN APOLOGETIC ASSESSMENT OF THE SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

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SYNOPSIS

When it comes to stereotypical caricatures, Islam and Mormonism could very well be the two religions most misunderstood in the Western world. When Islam is the topic, images of airliners crashing into buildings and terrorists strapping bombs around their bodies to blow up innocent bystanders are in the minds of many Western people, including a number of evangelical Christians. Bring up the topic of Mormonism—the religion of those belonging to the Utah-based Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—and many not familiar with this religion can only think of polygamy. There is no doubt that some Muslims are terrorists and that some nineteenth-century Mormons once practiced polygamy, but these stereotypical notions unfortunately have made it difficult for Christians to break through the mire in communicating truth to their Islamic or Mormon neighbors. Islam and Mormonism have their foundations in two different millennia, in two different hemispheres, while advocating two different belief systems, but they share a number of similarities that, at first glance, are not readily detectable. From their original founding to their view of scripture and their perspective on the human condition and salvation, most adherents from these two religions view evangelical Christians as apostates who lack the authority to lead people to the true worship of God. Understanding the mindsets of both the Muslim and the Mormon is necessary if the Christian hopes to reach out effectively to them with the gospel.

Two of the fastest growing religions in the world today are often misunderstood by those outside their ranks. Since the tragic events of 9/11, many think of bomb threats when they hear the words *Islam* or *Muslim*, despite the fact that relatively few Muslims would consider engaging in acts of terrorism. Meanwhile, many uninformed Americans joke about polygamous relationships whenever they hear the word *Mormon*, despite the fact that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church), which is based in Salt Lake City and is the largest and most widely known church that follows the teachings of Joseph Smith, Jr., has not advocated polygamy for more than a century.

Being misunderstood is not the only thing these two faiths have in common, however. When the two faiths are placed side by side, a number of interesting parallels make them ripe for comparison, despite the fact that they are poles apart in their doctrines, practices, and the places in the world where they thrive.

Islam began in the early seventh century when a 40-year-old man named Muhammad said the angel Gabriel appeared to him, revealing the words that later became the Islamic scripture known as the holy

Qur'an. Today it is estimated that there are more than one billion Muslims who belong to the Saudi Arabian-centered religion. Mormonism, meanwhile, traces its beginnings to the first half of the nineteenth century when a teen named Joseph Smith, Jr., claimed he was visited by God the Father and Jesus, as well as by an angel named Moroni. The latter eventually directed Smith to ancient plates made of gold that chronicle the story of the ancient American peoples. Smith later translated these plates and called the new scripture the Book of Mormon. There are more than 12 million Mormons today, with a slight majority residing outside North America.

Islam and Mormonism may not initially seem comparable, but the comparison is actually not new, going back to a few years after the founding of the Mormon Church in 1830. Writing in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, Arnold Green observed, "The initial comparison was perhaps made in 1834, when the anti-Mormon Pastor E. D. Howe suggested that Joseph Smith matched Muhammad's 'ignorance and stupidity.'...American Protestants vilify[ed] the Church and its prophet by likening them to Islam and Muhammad, long presumed fraudulent by Christians."¹ Green later noted that LDS leaders have "cast Islam in a positive historical role" since "Muhammad and other nonbiblical religious leaders and philosophers 'received a portion of God's light. Moral truths were given to them by God to enlighten whole nations,'" adding that Islam "was divinely instigated to 'scourge' apostate Christianity and to curb idolatry."²

At any rate, there is certainly apologetic value in comparing these two growing religions. The mindset of the Muslim, who adamantly holds to the authentic prophethood of Muhammad and the veracity of the Qur'an, has striking commonalities with that of the Mormon, who celebrates the bicentennial of Joseph Smith's birth this year while claiming that the Book of Mormon is the "most correct book on the face of the earth."³ Grasping these similarities will enable concerned Christians to better understand adherents of these religions and to better share the biblical faith.

WHAT IS SIMILAR ABOUT ISLAM AND MORMONISM?

A number of similarities could be discussed (see table 1), but we will limit ourselves to four main areas: founders and origins; scriptures; restoration claims; and teachings on the human condition and salvation.

A Look at Founders and Origins

The beginnings of both Islam and Mormonism are quite similar, especially when one considers the backgrounds and ideas of Muhammad and Joseph Smith. Consider that both men:

- came from poor families;
- had little education;
- wanted to unite the religions of their day;
- believed their new religions were a continuation from ancient biblical times;
- maintained that the Bible prophesied their own appearances on earth;
- claimed to have had revelations from God, allowing for their chosen lifestyles;
- were leaders of their own militias;
- started out monogamous but became polygamous;
- held that heaven would be filled with many physical pleasures, including sex.

In addition to similarities in the founders, the origins of the religions are also similar. Both Muhammad and Smith actively sought spiritual experiences. In the case of Muhammad, the angel Gabriel supposedly revealed the Qur'an during a 23-year period. For his part, the 14-year-old Smith misappropriated James 1:5 as a command to pray for spiritual truth and then allegedly had an encounter with both God the Father and Jesus Christ in the Sacred Grove located in New York state. Three years later the angel Moroni showed Smith the Book of Mormon's golden plates in the Hill Cumorah, but Smith was not allowed to take possession of them until September 1827. Both Muhammad and Smith, then, claimed to receive direct divine revelation through angels.

Muslims, Mormons, and Scripture

Another similarity between Islam and Mormonism is revelation leading to new scripture. In the case of Muhammad, the Qur'an was not translated; rather, it was received orally via direct revelation. After the death of Muhammad, it was realized that the sayings of the Qur'an were known only by memory. Following a battle that resulted in the deaths of many who had memorized the Qur'an, Uthman, the head of Islam at the time, organized the effort to write down the sayings, which were then preserved on a variety of materials. Uthman then determined what would be included as authoritative and had the other portions destroyed. To Muslims, the Qur'an is the perfect holy book and is highly revered in its original Arabic.⁴

Mormons today believe that the Book of Mormon—a scripture that claims to tell the history of Jews who traveled from the Holy Land to the Americas—was translated by Joseph Smith through the power of God.⁵ The Book of Mormon also speaks of the alleged postresurrection appearance of Jesus to the peoples living in the Americas. After the translation was complete, Moroni reclaimed possession of the plates.

Both Islam and Mormonism, then, add new scripture. Moreover, neither religion can claim to substantiate such new revelation by means such as textual criticism.⁶ Since there are supposedly no other authoritative copies from the time of the Qur'an, it is practically impossible to determine what was left out. In the case of the Book of Mormon, since the plates are no longer available, the end result is the same as with the Qur'an; namely, there is no way to validate the book or its source.

Restoring Lost Truths?

Both Islam and Mormonism claim to restore the true worship of God. During Muhammad's day more than 300 deities were worshiped in a Meccan shrine known as the *ka'ba*. Muhammad's initial work as a religious leader involved the proclamation that there is only one God (Allah) to whom people must submit and that a day of judgment is coming. Not surprisingly, Muhammad's views were unpopular with the polytheists.⁷ In addition, Muhammad did not think that the Jews and Christians in his area were properly worshiping the one true God.

Islam claims Allah is the same God who revealed himself to Moses and through Jesus, two of the most important of Islam's traditional 124,000 prophets that culminated in the last prophet, Muhammad. As Islam developed, Muslims took the position that the Old and New Testaments were corrupt.⁸ As a result, Christian belief in doctrines such as the Trinity and the deity of Christ are said to be wrong and blasphemous. Only through the revelation of the Qur'an is Allah's truth fully revealed.

In Mormonism's case, it is clear from Joseph Smith's own words that his initial calling by God the Father and the Son Jesus Christ involved the condemnation of all extant forms of Christian worship at the time as false. In fact, Mormons claim it was soon after the death of Jesus' disciples that true Christianity vanished from the face of the earth, only to be restored by Joseph Smith in the nineteenth century. Smith even recounted how God told him not to join any church because they were all false.⁹ It is on the basis of the four LDS scriptures, along with continuing revelation and guidance given by their living prophet and apostles, that Mormon leaders argue that the LDS Church is the most correct on earth.

The Human Condition and Salvation

Traditionally, both Islam and Mormonism hold to the view that human beings are born in an innocent state, in contrast to the Christian idea that the fall of humankind had extreme consequences resulting in depravity that touches every aspect of one's being. Islam sees the nature of human beings as basically good. Norman Geisler and Abdul Saleeb observe, "Despite some general similarities to the biblical version of man's fall, there are radical differences between the Christian and the Islamic interpretations of Adam's transgression. Whereas in Christian theology man's disobedience is considered a fundamental turning point in his relationship to God, according to the Muslim perspective this was *only a single slip* on Adam and Eve's part that was completely forgiven after their repentance. It had no further effect on the nature of man and the rest of creation (emphasis in original)."¹⁰

As a result, since human beings are not fallen, there is no need for salvation (or a savior) in the radical Christian sense. In Islam, human beings are good in general, with their good and bad deeds weighed on the scales of Allah, hopefully in their favor. This position should not be misunderstood as stating that Muslims do not believe in sin, as they clearly do.¹¹ With the exception of death in *jihad*, Muslims generally do not hold to an assurance of salvation. As such, "Islam is not a redemptive religion."¹²

The issue of the human condition is relevant to greater worldview matters such as salvation and redemption. In Mormonism, for instance, human beings are viewed not only as being born innocent, but the very fact that they were born into this earthly life is a positive sign of progression. This is because all souls who once lived in a preexistent state (the "first estate") behaved admirably in order to be allowed to live on earth (the "second estate"). Moreover, while Mormons believe that the best outcome for a person is to convert to Mormonism in order to strive for exaltation to godhood in the celestial kingdom, practically all humanity will be saved in one of Mormonism's three levels of heaven, including those who reject Latter-day Saint teachings in this life and even the next.¹³ As a result, the stakes of rejecting Mormonism are not as high as the rejection of Christianity or Islam, both of which declare an eternal hell for those who don't make the right choice in this life. As a result of their outlook on sin, it follows that both Islam and Mormonism hold to a weak understanding of the need for salvation and redemption.

For Mormons, Jesus brought salvation only in the sense that His death and resurrection allow humankind to be resurrected in bodily form with the ability to pursue exaltation to godhood via the system of the Latter-day Saints, particularly temple ordinances such as baptism, eternal marriage, and work for the dead. In Islam, since humans are not fallen, salvation and redemption are not pressing matters. What is important is submission to Allah, doing good works, and appealing to Allah's mercy on the day of judgment. It is true that the Muslim will often refer to the mercy of Allah and that the Mormon speaks about "salvation by grace," but both religions teach their adherents that they must earn their justification before God through good works.¹⁴

WHAT'S DIFFERENT ABOUT ISLAM AND MORMONISM?

There are not only many important similarities between Islam and Mormonism, but also significant differences.

Creation: Out of Nothing or Out of Something?

Along with Christians, Muslims believe that God created all that exists *ex nihilo* (out of nothing). Mormonism is quite different in its cosmology, claiming that God fashioned the universe out of preexisting material.¹⁵ God is eternal in some forms of LDS theology, but so is preexisting matter, including the material used by God to create human beings.¹⁶

By positing that God created out of preexistent matter, Mormonism has more in common with ancient pagan religions and ancient Greek philosophy than it does with the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim belief in creation *ex nihilo*.¹⁷ In contemporary terms, Mormonism advocates naturalistic explanations of the universe, explaining that matter of some kind has always existed. As a result, Mormonism also inherits a multitude of scientific difficulties that accompany this perspective. Moreover, the issue of creation relates to other significant worldview issues, such as the source of moral values, the problem of evil, and God's power. It is important to note that one's belief in creation has significant consequences and, in the case of Mormonism, the solutions are inadequate. For instance, is the Mormon God too weak to create *ex nihilo*? If so, then is he less than omnipotent? In contrast, the Christian explanations of creation *ex nihilo*, the fall, and redemption offer better explanations of the observable universe and of moral values.¹⁸

God: Unitarian vs. Monarchotheism

In many respects, Muslims agree with Christians on important points, such as God's omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience. Both are adamant regarding the monotheistic understanding of God. Muslims, however, stress the singular nature of Allah, rejecting the Trinity and believing that God is so transcendent that He is beyond the reach of a personal relationship with human beings. Christian theism

acknowledges God's transcendence but also explains that God is immanent, even to the point of coming to earth in the form of a man, Jesus, in order to redeem sinful humanity by His death and resurrection.

While certain theologians within contemporary Mormonism affirm the existence of one eternal God and believe that "exaltation" refers to individual deification to a lesser degree than that of Elohim, traditional Mormonism claims that God was once a man and became God. One reason some contemporary Mormon scholars are moving away from this traditional model, which was originally taught by Joseph Smith, is because it is philosophically weak. One ends up with an infinite regression of gods with no adequate explanation for how the system began. As for LDS theology, Christian scholar Stephen Parrish argues that the best term for this contemporary Mormon concept of deity is *monarchotheism*, which is "the theory that there is more than one God, but one God is clearly preeminent among the gods; in effect, he is the monarch or ruler of all the gods."¹⁹

Jesus: One God among Many or Merely a Human Prophet?

Latter-day Saints affirm the divinity of Christ and His virgin birth, miracles, and bodily resurrection. This may seem orthodox, but a closer look at LDS teaching reveals significant points of disagreement with Christian positions on these doctrines. For instance, while LDS leaders say Jesus is the "Son of God" and "the Only Begotten Son in the flesh,"²⁰ they do not hold that He is God in the flesh or the second person of the Trinity. In Mormon theology, Jesus is one god among many. Also, Mormons have claimed that the virgin birth involved a physical union between God the Father and Mary.²¹

Muslims do acknowledge Jesus as a great prophet and accept His virgin birth,²² sinlessness,²³ and miracles,²⁴ but they adamantly reject His deity as well as His death by crucifixion. Some Muslims argue that someone else died in the place of Jesus.²⁵ Because Muslims often interpret in a literal fashion the Christian doctrine of God "begetting" a Son, they hold that Christians add another being to the nature of God. This is blasphemous to the Islamic mindset, since Allah is the only God and can therefore have no companions.

Humankind's Final State

Muslims believe that after they face the judgment of Allah, human beings will live forever either in a heavenly paradise or a painful hell. There are no second chances in traditional Islam. Latter-day Saints, on the other hand, posit a system that comes close to universalism. While not everyone will be saved in Mormonism, the vast majority of people will make it into one of three levels of heaven. "Outer darkness" is reserved for Satan and the demons as well as certain Mormon apostates.

APPLES AND ORANGES?

Are Islam and Mormonism apples and oranges? Yes and no. There are indeed important differences, but there are also a number of striking similarities that are significant enough to warrant specific comparison. In addition, the exceptionally rapid growth of both Islam and Mormonism underscores the need to analyze these faiths both individually and comparatively. In closing, it should be noted that both religions must overcome challenging apologetic obstacles in order to substantiate their claims, such as demonstrating that new and authoritative written revelation was necessary, that true worship was in need of restoration, that the Bible is unreliable, that human beings are good by nature, and more. At any rate, a discussion of Islam and Mormonism offers an opportunity for more than a mere academic comparison of the two faiths. It also highlights the importance and interconnectedness of key doctrines such as views of scripture, the human condition, salvation, creation, and—most importantly—the nature of God and Christ. As Jesus said, "This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" (John 17:3 NIV). Unfortunately, Islam and Mormonism fall short of worshipping God "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24).

TABLE 1

ISSUE	ISLAM	MORMONISM
Bible	Views it as largely corrupt, but accepts portions.	Views it as largely corrupt, but accepts the KJV Bible “insofar as it is translated correctly.”
Religious Destiny	Strong overall sense: believes Islam will spread throughout the world and ultimately dominate.	Strong overall sense: believes Mormonism will spread throughout the world.
Division after Death of Founder	Experienced power struggles and confusion; smaller sect followed descendants of the prophet.	Experienced uncertainty regarding successor; smaller sect followed descendants of the prophet.
Human Condition	Human beings are basically good. Biblical atonement is not needed.	Human beings are basically good. Atonement allows the opportunity to become gods.
Origins	Muhammad received angelic revelations (and other) revelations.	Joseph Smith received angelic (and other) revelations.
Polygamy	Is sanctioned by the Qur’an; practiced by Muhammad and other followers.	Was approved until 1890; practiced by Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, and other followers.
Prophets	Believes Muhammad was God’s last and greatest prophet.	Believes Joseph Smith was God’s key prophet.
Restoration	Claims to restore true religious worship.	Claims to restore true religious worship.
Salvation	Works-based. Allah will judge good and bad works.	Works-based (though some contemporary LDS trends are moving away from this model).
Scripture	Qur’an was divinely revealed and without error in the original Arabic. The Bible is filled with unauthorized changes.	Book of Mormon was divinely revealed. Smith claimed it was “the most correct of any book on earth.” The Bible is true only as far as it is translated correctly.
Testimony	Proclaims: “There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet” (known as <i>Shahadah</i> , meaning “to bear witness”).	Proclaims: “I bear my testimony that Joseph Smith is a prophet of God, that the Book of Mormon is true, that the LDS is the true church, etc.”
Trinity	Denies it. Sometimes interprets it as consisting of God, Jesus, and Mary	Denies it. Interprets it as three separate gods.

NOTES

1. Daniel H. Ludlow, ed., *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, vol. 4 (New York: Macmillan, 1992), s.v. "World Religion" by Arnold H. Green. The term "anti-Mormon" is often used by Mormons in reference to anyone criticizing the teachings of the Latter-day Saints, regardless of the spirit in which such criticism is offered. We agree that there is no place in legitimate apologetics for *ad hominem* arguments, caricatures of another religion, or openly hostile attacks of any kind against another religion and its adherents. At the same time, Jude 3, 1 John 4:1, and 1 Peter 3:15–16 clearly indicate that Christians must at times engage in legitimate criticism of other worldviews.
2. Ibid. This idea was communicated in the LDS First Presidency statement on February 15, 1978, regarding God's love for humanity, which said, in part, that Muhammad was one of "the great religious leaders of the world" who helped "bring a higher level of understanding to individuals."
3. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, 4:461.
4. On page 46 of *Readings in the Qur'an* (New York: Harper Collins, 1988), Kenneth Cragg observes, "It is the firm conviction of Muslims that without its Arabic the Qur'an ceases to be itself. A non-Arabic Qur'an is a contradiction in terms."
5. Later authoritative LDS scriptures are the Pearl of Great Price and Doctrine and Covenants. The King James Version of the Bible is also utilized and considered Scripture.
6. Textual criticism includes appeals to extant documents, comparisons of such documents, etc.
7. Whereas Muhammad called people to monotheism, a case can be made that Mormonism, in the end, calls people to polytheism or, at the very least, the variant known as henotheism. *Monarchotheism* is mentioned later in this article.
8. While some Muslim apologists will argue that sacred texts such as the law of the Old Testament and the Gospels are merely misinterpreted, the majority of Muslims seem to take the approach that these texts were corrupted over time. Muslims revere the Law, Psalms, and Gospels.
9. *Joseph Smith—History* 1:19. Some contemporary Mormons argue that, in retrospect, the personages who appeared to Smith and their condemnation of other beliefs meant only that he should join none of the local churches in his region, as those particular churches were all corrupt. As Ron Rhodes notes in *The Challenge of the Cults and New Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001, 59–60): "This revisionist line of reasoning fails because, if this were so, all Smith had to do was move to a neighboring community and seek out a minister who was not corrupt. It would not have been necessary to completely 'restore' the church of Jesus Christ on earth by founding the Mormon church."
10. Norman L. Geisler and Abdul Saleeb, *Answering Islam: The Crescent in the Light of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 42.
11. For more on the Muslim view of sin, see Chawkat Moucarray, *The Prophet and the Messiah: An Arab Christian's Perspective on Islam and Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), chap. 7.
12. Winfried Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths: A Christian Introduction to World Religions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 92.
13. Mormonism teaches that the fall of humankind is a blessing rather than a curse (2 Nephi 2:25; Moses 5:10–11). In addition, salvation after death can be attained via work in the temple by living people in proxy for those already dead.
14. Mormons often disagree that salvation in their religion comes by works. It is important to distinguish between the two types of salvation found within Mormonism. *General salvation* (saved by grace) is the ability for all humankind to make it to one of the three levels of heaven while *individual salvation* is the performance of good works, which are necessary for a person to attain "exaltation" in the celestial kingdom. The Christian should thus be aware that language can be similar (e.g., "salvation by grace alone") when meaning is different.
15. See Paul Copan and William Lane Craig, "Craftsman or Creator? An Examination of the Mormon Doctrine of Creation and a Defense of *Creatio ex nihilo*," in *The New Mormon Challenge*, ed. Francis J. Beckwith, Carl Mosser, and Paul Owen, 95–152 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002).
16. John Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliations* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1960), 150; *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 400, 478, 869.
17. Christian apologist Richard Abanes points out on page 130 of his book *Becoming Gods* (Eugene: Harvest House, 2004) how ironic it is that LDS scholars attempt to undermine the Christian doctrine of the Trinity by claiming it originated from Greek philosophy even though their own religion "shares many beliefs with pagan Hellenistic thought: for example, the eternity of matter, the pre-existence of spirits, and human deification. The LDS acceptance of many gods also mirrors the pagan beliefs of several ancient cultures: among others, the Assyrians, Babylonians, and Sumerians."
18. See Francis J. Beckwith, "Moral Law, the Mormon Universe, and the Nature of the Right We Ought to Choose," in *The New Mormon Challenge*, 219–41.
19. Stephen Parrish, "A Tale of Two Theisms," in *The New Mormon Challenge*, 195.
20. "Jesus Christ," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <http://www.mormon.org/learn/0,8672,802-1,00.html>.
21. See Bill McKeever and Eric Johnson, *Mormonism 101* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 43–45.
22. See Suras 3:37–45; 19:16–21.
23. Sura 19:19.
24. Sura 3:49.
25. About Christ's death, Sura 4:157–158 says, "But they killed him not, Nor crucified him, But so it was made To appear to them... Nay, God raised him up Unto Himself" (A. Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary* [Brentwood, Maryland: Amana Corp., 1983]).