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Is Jesus the Son of God?

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IS JESUS CHRIST THE SON OF GOD? RESPONDING TO THE MUSLIM VIEW OF JESUS

Joseph Cumming

When you talk about matters of faith with your nonbelieving secular neighbors, what Christian belief do they object to most? Is it the biblical concept of Hell? Your views on the uniqueness of Christ, or the inerrancy of Scripture? For many of your Muslim neighbors, these Christian beliefs are not offensive. Indeed, your Muslim neighbor may mostly agree with you on these points. But most Muslims do find deeply offensive another belief that is central to the Christian faith — the assertion that Jesus Christ is the “Son of God.”

In my 15 years living in an Islamic Republic in the Arab world, and my additional 12 years working daily with Muslims around the world, I have found that many Muslims consider this Christian belief to be more offensive than any other. If you are a pastor who encourages your congregation to reach out in love to their Muslim neighbors, you must help them think through how to respond to Muslim concerns about this sacred title of our Savior.

Common Ground?

Before going deeper into this sharp difference between Muslims and Christians, let us remember that Christians do have some important common ground with Muslims regarding the person of Jesus. The *Qur'an* teaches that Jesus was born of a virgin (Sura 19:20); that He is a Prophet (Sura 2:136); that He is among those closest to God (3:45); that He taught a message of kindness and compassion (57:27); that He healed the sick and raised the dead by the power of God (3:49); that He miraculously fed the hungry (5:112ff.); that He is alive now in heaven (3:55); and that He will return at the end of the age (43:61). Remarkably, the *Qur'an* affirms that Jesus is the Messiah and the Word of God (3:45 and 4:171), though most Muslims do not understand these

titles the way Christians do. Muslims revere Jesus. Most will not say His name without immediately adding “Peace be upon Him” — which in Arabic need not imply He is in need of peace, but rather that we hail Him with respect.

At the same time, however, most Muslims feel strongly that Jesus did not die on a cross. They believe He did not rise from the dead or atone for human sin, and that people should not worship Him as God. Muslims generally believe that the One God of Abraham is not triune and has not become incarnate among us. Though they believe the New Testament, Torah, and Psalms are God’s inerrant Word in the original manuscripts, most also believe that people have so thoroughly altered the original text that the Bible we have today is not reliable. They often feel most strongly, however, that it is deeply offensive to refer to Jesus as the Son of God.

These are not marginal issues. If you remove the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Cross, and the Bible from the Christian faith, you have removed virtually all that Christians consider necessary to salvation. In articles elsewhere¹ I have suggested a way forward on some of these other issues. Here I will focus on helping you equip your congregation to respond constructively to Muslims’ objection to the title “Son of God.”

The Importance of Context

Most Muslim-Christian conversations on this topic take place in a polemical context. Search the blogosphere and you will find Muslims and Christians saying nasty things to each other about the doctrine of Christ’s divine Sonship. The problem with this is that it is very possible to win an argument while losing a friend — and alienating that friend from Jesus.

In Matthew 18:15, Jesus reminds us that when we disagree with a friend, the goal of our conversation should be to win “your brother or sister,” not merely to win the argument. If you give your congregation powerful apologetics to prove that Jesus is the divine Son of God, but your congregation does not know how to communicate that message in love, you will have failed to equip your congregation.

We must first reach out in simple, warm friendship to our Muslim neighbors. I am not implying that giving verbal expression to one’s faith is not critically important — only that this expression must take place in a context of friendship, love, and mutual trust and respect. Christians should have no fear if opportunities for conversations about

faith arise. Unlike many secular people, many Muslims are delighted to talk about religious questions with their Christian friends. Of course, for friendship to be genuine, we must see it as valuable in itself, not only as a means to an end.

The most important key to relationships with Muslim friends is giving and receiving hospitality. If a Muslim friend drops in to see you, always remember to offer something to eat or drink. Look for ways to befriend them within your cultural context. In America, for example, you might invite them and their family over for a meal, and accept their invitations for meals. In the Philippines, as another example, you might invite them to a group gathering such as a party for your anniversary celebration or when you celebrate other things with friends. In most Muslim-majority cultures, sharing food together is an important part of building friendships. Make sure to invite Muslims of the same sex as you, or else include spouse(s) or same-sex relatives in the invitation. When you invite them, make sure to not serve pork, ham or bacon. It may help if you reassure Muslim friends in your invitation that you will not serve these things.

In my experience, when I discuss Christ's divine Sonship with a Muslim acquaintance in a context of polemics and mistrust, neither of us progress in helping each other understand what we believe and why it is important to us. But when we build a friendship through breaking bread together, and then talk respectfully about what we believe, suddenly we are able to communicate in a meaningful way.

Not What We Say, But What They Hear

In talking with Muslims about Jesus, we must learn what we call "receptor-oriented communication." We must think not only about what we intend to say, but also about what others are hearing. When Christians use the phrase "Son of God," most Muslims hear something very different from what Christians think they have said and from what the Bible affirms. To understand this more deeply, let us look first at the *Qur'an* and then the Bible to see what they say about the term "Son of God."

Muslims' daily prayers involve reciting short passages from the *Qur'an*. Many Muslims daily recite *Surat al-Ikhlās* (112), one of the shorter chapters in the *Qur'an*: "Say: He is God the One. God the Absolute Eternal. He does not beget, nor is he begotten, nor is there anything like unto Him." This reminds devout Muslims daily that God does not beget, nor is God begotten.

But what does the Arabic verb *walada* (“beget”) mean? Though it is cognate with the Hebrew verb *yalad* (Psalm 2:7), the Arabic word has a narrower range of meaning — generally referring to literal, carnal begetting through the sexual union of male and female. This is, of course, not what the Bible teaches about Jesus, nor what Christians believe.

This meaning of the verb *walada* (and the related noun *walad* — son or child) is clear in other passages in which the *Qur’an* addresses whether God has children. Sura 6:101 is one of many verses that say, “How could God have a son (*walad*) when he does not have a female consort?” Interestingly, when Arab Christians speak about Jesus Christ as the Son of God, they generally use a different Arabic word for Son (*ibn*) — cognate to the Hebrew word *ben* — which has a broader range of meaning than *walad*.

This is not to say that Arab Christians never use the verb *walada* in a metaphorical or noncarnal sense. The Nicene Creed in Arabic uses it in that way. But when Muslims use this word, they nearly always mean it in a literal, carnal sense. By contrast the *Qur’an* frequently uses the word *ibn* in a metaphorical sense in the expression “son of the road” — the traveler in need of hospitality.

So when a Christian says, “I believe Jesus is the Son of God,” often what the Christian’s Muslim friend hears is: “I believe God had sexual relations with Mary and carnally produced an illegitimate divine-human offspring.” This is repugnant to both Muslims and Christians alike. No wonder Muslims are offended by this title.

So, Change the Translation?

More than 95 percent of the problem over the title “Son of God” is a problem of miscommunication, rather than an objection to Christian doctrine. In other words, Muslim friends are rejecting something other than what Christians are affirming.

Because the literal meaning of “Son of God” communicates to Muslims something so radically different from what the Bible affirms, some people suggest we change the way we translate the New Testament phrase “Son of God” (*huios tou theou*). They suggest we find “dynamic equivalent” expressions that will communicate more accurately what the Bible intends. Although this proposal reflects traditional translation principles, I disagree with it for two reasons.

First, I have yet to see an alternate metaphor that communicates the full range of diverse, complex, and powerful

meanings bound up in the words “Father” and “Son” in the Bible (see below for analysis of those meanings). Second, the term “Son of God” is so central to the Bible and to Christian theological tradition that most Muslims are very much aware that the phrase is supposed to be in the Bible. If we replace it with a dynamic equivalent, we only seem to confirm Muslims’ concern that Christians feel free to alter the biblical text when it suits us. We thereby undermine the credibility of the Bible.

But before dismissing this suggestion too quickly, it is important to understand what a powerful emotional impact the term Son of God has on many Muslims. Linguists tell us that the emotional connotations of certain expressions are so deeply embedded in our neural pathways that even if we try to apply a new meaning to the expression, we cannot separate it from its older emotional associations. Even Muslim-background believers in Christ, who understand what Son of God means and accept that meaning, sometimes struggle with using the phrase. The feelings they associate with the phrase Son of God — developed in early childhood — mean that it inevitably prompts them to think of the idea of illegitimate offspring of a sexual union between God and Mary.

Does the suggestion that Jesus is illegitimate offend you? What about the notion that God had sexual intercourse with Mary? Of course such a concept offends. And it should. But this is precisely how many Muslim friends feel even after their Christian friends have tried to clarify what Christians do and do not mean by the term Son of God.

This is still not sufficient reason to change the way we translate Scripture. But it is sufficient reason to be extremely careful about how we use this term with our Muslim friends. It is better first to establish a warm friendship built on mutual trust and mutual respect than to use the term lightly or carelessly. And most important: Never use the term without immediately explaining what you do and do not mean by it.

What Does “Son of God” Mean in the Bible?

The phrase “Son of God” has different meanings in different contexts in the Bible. The first sense, which most Bible scholars see as its most common meaning in the Gospels, is simply a messianic title — more or less equivalent to “Messiah,” “Son of David,” or “King of Israel.” Matthew 26:63; John 1:49; 11:27; and 20:31 provide examples of this. The origin of this term as a messianic title comes from 2 Samuel 7 and parallel passages in 1 Chronicles 17 and 22. David

wanted to build a temple for the Lord, but the Lord promised to raise up a descendant of David who would build an eternal temple and whose throne God would establish forever. God says of this future messianic ruler: “I will be his father, and he will be my son. I will never take away my love from him” (1 Chronicles 17:13).

So far, most Muslims would not disagree with this. In these passages the title “Son of God” may not necessarily imply any divine status (but see Psalm 45:6). It simply means the promised messianic ruler who has a special love relationship with God. In no sense does it imply literal, carnal begetting. But in other biblical passages “Son of God” (or the plural “children of God”) has other meanings.

A second sense in which the term is used is in John 1:12,13 — one of many passages in the Bible that refer to believers in Jesus as “children of God.” Clearly this does not refer to literal, carnal begetting; indeed, verse 13 explicitly rejects the idea of any sexual begetting. Rather, this refers to a metaphorical, spiritual relationship of love.

A third sense is in Acts 17:28,29, which says that all human beings are in some sense “God’s offspring” (obviously a different sense from John 1:12). And Luke 3:38 refers to Adam as a “son of God.” Again this is clearly not referring to any kind of literal, carnal begetting.

Though most Muslims would not use the term “children of God” to refer to believers in general or to human beings in general, my experience is that in a nonpolemical context of friendship, most Muslims agree (with qualifications) that they do not find this sense of the term offensive. Indeed, on a few occasions I have heard Muslim leaders and scholars use the term “children of God” in reference to believers in the God of Abraham or to human beings in general. Similarly, most Muslims would not refer to God as our “Father” in this sense, but they do not necessarily find this offensive. On a few occasions, I have heard Muslim leaders and scholars affirm (with qualifications) that God is our Father in the sense of being a loving Provider who cares for us, disciplines us, teaches us, and takes delight in us.

God the Son?

There is a critically important fourth sense in which the Bible uses “Son of God,” notably in several passages in John. Here the term

is more-or-less equivalent to the “Word of God” who is God’s self-expression and the visible manifestation of the invisible God.

John 1 says the Word of God was eternally with God and is God, and that through God’s Word all things were created, and that this Word was manifested in Jesus Christ, and that we have seen His glory. In verse 18 it adds (though the Greek here is open to other translations): “No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.” John then used the term “Son” in this sense in several passages.

In John 5:18–26, Jesus says that everyone should “honor the Son just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him.” This passage also seems to affirm that by talking about His relationship with God in this way Jesus was “making himself equal [or identical] with God.” In John 10:30, Jesus says, “I and the Father are one.” And in John 14:9, Jesus says, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.”

Biblical texts like these launched a centuries-long process of theological reflection on the relationship of the Word/Son to God the Father, in light of the Bible’s strong assertion that God is One. This led to the articulation of what we now call the doctrine of divine Trinity. Today, many Christians, when they use the term “Son of God,” really mean “God the Son, the Second Person of the Trinity.” It is important to remember that the Bible does not use the term in precisely that way. That usage reflects the mature theological formulations of later centuries. But it is equally important to remember that the Bible does use the term in ways that lead inevitably to an understanding of God as triune.

Though the *Qur’an* refers to Jesus as God’s Word, most Muslims do not understand that term in the way the Bible does. But even on this point it is clear that the biblical term “Son” is not referring to literal, carnal begetting. It is describing a unique, eternal, spiritual relationship between Jesus and God. Muslims’ objection here is not to the term “Son” itself, but to the idea that God was manifest in human flesh and that Jesus Christ is that manifestation.

On that question we can have a more constructive conversation if we think about the relationship of God’s Word to God’s own Being. The Islamic theological tradition has a rich heritage of vigorous debate about the relationship of God’s Word to God’s Essence. The *Qur’an*, like the Bible, teaches that all things were created by God’s Word — by God’s speaking to them and saying “Be!”

(e.g. Sura 16:40). The majority Sunni community concluded therefore that God's Word itself is eternal and uncreated. They also concluded that God's Word is not identical with God's Essence, nor is it anything other than God; rather God's Word eternally and uncreatedly subsists in God's Essence. Some Sunni theologians concluded further that since God's Word is manifest in the Holy *Qur'an*, therefore the *Qur'an* is both the eternal, uncreated quality of Speech in God and also the created, temporal expression of that eternal Word.

Some important differences exist between this doctrine and the mainstream Christian understanding of the two natures of Christ — divine (uncreated) and human (created) — and of the relationship of the divine Word/Logos to the Father. I do not propose to minimize or ignore those differences. But there are enough similarities that this can serve as a bridge for understanding, so when Christians explain what they believe, Muslims may understand accurately what their Christian friends intended to say, whether or not they agree.

Unintentional Heresies

Unfortunately, many Christians are ill-informed about their own faith. When they try to explain their faith to a Muslim friend, they unintentionally express views the Church has historically understood as heretical.

For example, the *Qur'an* asserts that Jesus was created like Adam from the dust (e.g. 3:59). In response, some Christians stoutly assert that Jesus is in no sense a created human being. Nonetheless, traditional Christian doctrine holds that Jesus has two natures — divine and human — united in one person. His divine nature (the Word/Logos) is uncreated (John 1:1). But His human nature is like us in every way except sin (Hebrews 2:17; 4:15), created from the dust and temporal just like us. To deny Jesus' fully humanness is conventionally referred to as "the Docetist heresy."

Other Christians, when talking with Muslim friends, fall into what is known as "the Apollinarian heresy" — the belief that Jesus' soul was divine and was clothed in a human body. The problem with this is that if Jesus did not have a fully human soul, then He was not like us in every way — and tempted like us — yet without sin.

Other Christians, seeking to be sensitive to their Muslim friends, emphasize so strongly the separation between human and divine in Christ that they describe Jesus as nothing more than a human

being indwelt by God. This is often called “the Nestorian heresy” (though the historical Nestorius held more nuanced views).

Talking with Muslim friends will very likely put to the test how well your congregation understands their own faith about the person of Christ. The four most common errors into which lay Christians (and some pastors) unintentionally slip are the following: 1) forgetting that Christ in His divine nature as the Logos is fully God, 2) forgetting that in His full human nature Christ is of the very same essence as we are, 3) forgetting that these two natures are indissolubly united in one person, and 4) forgetting that that union does not take away the distinction between the two natures.

Conclusion

As pastor, the more you equip your congregation to understand sound doctrine about the person of Christ, the more you will have equipped them to respond faithfully to questions raised by their Muslim friends. And in the process, you will have also equipped them at a deeper level for the life of faith itself — because our salvation depends on the person of Christ. As many Christian thinkers through the centuries have pointed out: “If Christ were not God, He could not save us, because only God can save us. But if Christ were not human, He could not save *us* because only someone who is like us in every way except sin can represent us as our high priest offering himself in atonement for our sins.” The salvation of the human race depends upon the fact Jesus Christ is both fully divine and fully human, and that these two natures are united but distinct in one person — the Son of God.

Notes

1. Yale Center for Faith and Culture. <http://yale.edu/faith/rc/rc-rp.htm>. Accessed 25 October 2011.

Study Questions

1. How do you see the social context in which Muslims and Christians talk about this issue?
2. What beliefs about Jesus do Muslims and Christians have in common?
3. What does “Son of God” mean to Muslims, and how does that make you feel?

4. What does the Bible mean by “Son of God”?
5. How might you discuss these questions with a Muslim friend?

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