

Is Allah of the Qur'an Holy?

A Comparison Between Yahweh and Allah

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One of the 99 names of Allah is Al-Quddus (الْقُدُّوسُ), which refers to “the Holy.” This word is used only two times in the Qur'an, in suras 59:23 and 64:1, and both times it is found as part of a list of attributes. Consequently, holiness seems to be peripheral to Allah and not a major focus even though it is listed as one of the 99 names. In comparison, the word “holy,” and its derivatives, used in reference to Yahweh in the Bible, occurs over 600 times and is central to his nature: “You shall be holy to me, for I the LORD am holy” (Leviticus 20:26). In the New Testament, Jesus challenges us to be holy: “Be holy, even as your heavenly Father is holy.” (Matt. 5:48) The Hebrew word translated “holy,” *qadash* (Hebrew: קָדַשׁ), carries the meaning of “set apart,” sanctified, consecrated, and hallowed. The Greek word translated “holy,” *hagios* (ἅγιος), implies an absence of fault or impurity. Thus, for the Christian to be holy means that they need to be cleansed of faults and set apart by God, who is Himself faultless and pure. However, the Bible makes it clear that we cannot make ourselves holy because we are by nature sinners, and therefore our nature is impure. Only through the substitutionary death and resurrection of Christ are Christians able to be deemed “holy” in the presence of God. This is the critical difference between holiness in the Bible and the Qur'an, and a key difference between

Allah of the Qur'an and Yahweh of the Bible. Since substitutionary atonement is not required of Muslims, and Allah can forgive according to his whims, there is no understanding in the Qur'an, or in Islamic theology, for man's need to be cleansed of his faults and set apart by Allah. Our sin nature is therefore undermined, and the holiness of Allah is not only diminished but inconsequential to his nature. If this is the case, then can we say that Allah of the Qur'an is actually "holy"?

This paper will explore the comparative views of holiness in regard to Allah of the Qur'an and Yahweh of the Bible in order to demonstrate not only the differences in the understanding of "holiness," but also to provide an apologetical approach to reaching Muslims for the gospel by emphasizing the necessity of Christ's substitutionary death on the cross so that we could be deemed holy through our relationship with Jesus Christ. This key difference in holiness between Allah and Yahweh will also be explored as one of the most persuasive arguments to demonstrate that Allah and Yahweh cannot be the same God.

Holiness in Regard to Allah

In comparison to the many times that holiness is ascribed to Yahweh in the Bible, the Qur'an only has two instances of the use of the word, and both of them merely list the word as part of the list of 99 names of Allah. Al-Quddus, or The Holy, is the 15th listing of the 99 names of Allah. Muslims will say that this is one of the most important attributes and the foundation for one of the main characteristics of Islam.¹ However, there is very little in the Qur'an or the Hadith that refers to Allah's holiness. The following verses include the name "Al-Quddus," but they are only part of a list of other attributes, all of which lack any contextual content. They are merely

¹ Muhammad Apel Hossain, "The Importance and Virtue of Holiness in Islam," <https://advancetextile86.blogspot.com/2022/02/the-importance-and-virtue-of-holiness.html>.

representative names of Allah. As we can see, the reference to Allah’s holiness, as well as the other attributes, is merely descriptive and not substantive.

59: 23 — “He is Allah, besides Whom there is no god; the King, the **Holy**, the Giver of peace, the Granter of security, Guardian over all, the Mighty, the Supreme, the Possessor of every greatness Glory be to Allah from what they set up (with Him).”

62:1 — “Whatever is in the heavens and whatever is in the earth declares the glory of Allah, the King, the **Holy**, the Mighty, the Wise.”

The Hadith also barely mention “Al-Quddus.” In one hadith, A’isha reports that Muhammad would sometimes call on Allah as the “all glorious, all Holy, Lord of the Angels and Spirit.”² Other times in prayer Muhammad would say, “glory be to the Sovereign, the Most Holy,”³ or he would say “Glory be to the king most holy.”⁴ These two references are made on multiple Muslim web sites, but there are no additions to the list. This tells me that these statements were either not frequent or not incorporated into the lives of Muhammad’s followers in regard to their personal prayers.

Muslim Views on Holiness

The Muslim understanding of man’s sin and Allah’s holiness is often developed through the lens of a person’s personal holiness. Muslims believe that one of the main purposes of the Prophet Muhammad was to emphasize the importance of personal holiness and purity of heart. They will point out a prayer of Abraham which says, “Our Lord, raise up among them an apostle who may rehearse Thy signs unto them, and teach them the Book and Wisdom, and purify them.” (Q 2:123) Ahmed Galwash believes that the reference to “purification” at the end of the

² Sahih Muslim 487a.

³ Sahih an-Nasa’I 1699, 1732.

⁴ Sahih Dawud 1430.

verse is considered to be the most important function of the Prophet of Islam.⁵ However, Galwash goes on to undercut the value of purity in personal holiness by diminishing the need for holiness in the actions of men. Galwash considers some wrong acts or evil thoughts as a sin, but only if they are deliberate. He writes,

Commission of a wrong act, without previous intention and deliberation does not make one guilty, far less a passing thought that rises like a bubble only to die and disappear the next moment. Adam ate of the forbidden fruit and thereby committed a mistake as all men are liable to commit mistakes; but he was never guilty of committing sin, and the Holy Koran clears him of the false accusation, just as it has cleared other prophets, like Moses and Jesus of similar charges.⁶

Therefore, Galwash declares with the sweep of his pen that only if the action is deliberate can it be deemed to be sin. Otherwise, it is simply a mistake or an accident. Perhaps this is the reason that many Muslims will claim that all the prophets of Islam were without sin. However, this view is actually contrary to the Qur'an, which acknowledges the sins of the other prophets and specifically refers to the sins of Adam (Sura 7:23), Abraham (26:82), Moses (28:16), Johan (37:142), and Muhammad (47:19, 48:2). Also, it is important to note that the Qur'an declares that Jesus was without sin. When the Angel Jibril (Gabriel) appeared to Mary to announce her conception of Jesus, he said: "I am only a messenger of your Lord, to announce to you a faultless son" (Q 19:19). Some Muslims respond that Jesus was "faultless" or "sinless" in the same way as the other prophets. However, Jesus is the only one in the Qur'an who is specified to be faultless. For example, the Qur'an expressly commands Muhammad to ask forgiveness for his sin (Q. 47:19), but this is never raised in regard to Jesus.

⁵ Ahmed A. Galwash, *The Religion of Islam*, vol. 1, "The Koran and the Doctrine of Personal Holiness." <https://www.islambasics.com/chapter/the-koran-and-the-doctrine-of-personal-holiness>

⁶ Ibid.

Another Muslim author, Mohammad Ratib En-Nabulsi, who writes on holiness recognizes that if Allah is holy then he is exalted above all things. In regard to a person's personal holiness, En-Nabulsi writes,

When we say that someone is holy, it means that he is pure, because holiness without purity is nonsense. Someone is holy means that he is straightforward, he is chaste, he is pure, he is kind-hearted and magnanimous, he has good intentions, there is no hatred or malice in his heart, he never cheats, his eyes do not look at indecent or unlawful things, he always watches his tongue, and he never utters indecent or unlawful words. In other words, a person is not holy unless he is free from impurities or qualities of perfection.⁷

This list would compare well with a list from Christians writing about personal holiness. However, he also wrote that in comparison with the exalted nature of Allah, "man has to purify himself in order to attain a laudable position with Allah, the All-Mighty King."⁸ Thus, according to this view, which is very popular in Islam, Muslims must basically work out their own salvation by doing more good works than bad and asking forgiveness from Allah for the "intentional" sins that they commit.

Interestingly, Muslim critics of Christianity view the Christian God as being too weak to forgive a person's sins without the shedding of blood. If God is powerful, Muslims challenge, then he would be able to declare a sinner righteous without requiring a blood sacrifice. After all, Muslims believe that Allah has the power to clear the sins of any Muslim by simply willing the person to be forgiven. However, what the Muslims do not realize is that the Christian God's refusal to simply declare a sinner forgiven is due to his holiness. God cannot accept sinners because they cannot pay their debt due to their sinfulness. Only a perfect man can pay the penalty. Therefore, to say that a Muslim can make himself pure before God is actually a declaration of the lack of holiness of the God of Islam.

⁷ Mohammad Ratib En-Nabulsi, "Al-Quddous: The Holy." <https://knowingallah.com/en/articles/al-quddous-the-holy/>

⁸ Ibid.

Holiness in Regard to Yahweh

According to Christian doctrine, since man is created in God's image, there are some attributes of God that we can share, such as love, mercy, faithfulness. However, because of our finite limitations, there are also a number of God's attributes that we cannot share, such as omnipresence, omniscience, and omnipotence. Holiness happens to be another attribute of God that we cannot share to the same extent. In a sense, we have limited holiness, and God has infinite holiness. This is because holiness is not something that we can possess as an inherent part of our nature because it is an imputed holiness. As 2 Corinthians 5:21 states, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." It is through the substitutionary death of Christ on the cross where he took our place and died to pay for our sins that we now are able to share in a limited holiness. However, God's holiness is much more than just his perfection or sinless purity. It is an infinite holiness which makes him separate and distinct from everything else. In his "other-ness," the transcendence of God's holiness hides the mystery of his awesome nature, while his immanence through the holiness of the Son allows us to see a limited view of his majesty. In this way, we can share in the transcendent experience of Isaiah when he was transported to the temple of God and witnessed the glory of God that elicited the thrice-part praise of the angels singing "Holy, holy, holy" (Isaiah 6:3). It is significant to understand that the adulation from the angels recognized the triune nature of God, which represents both the transcendent holiness as well as the immanent holiness of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In fact, it is because of the triune nature of God in regard to his holiness that we can demonstrate that Allah, the god of Islam, is not only not the same god as Yahweh, but also that Allah cannot be a holy god as well.

Tawhid versus Trinity

One of the main differences between Allah and Yahweh is found in the comparison between the Muslim concept of *Tawhid* and the Christian belief in the Trinity. Muslim doctrine states that everything derives from the understanding that there can only be one god in the universe, and, in a sense, God is the only reality, or, as Reza Aslan states, “the *only* being with real existence.”⁹ This is the concept of *Tawhid*, the unity of God, which Muslims believe to be the foundation of Islam. Reza Aslan believes that this concept even goes beyond monotheism. “Tawhid means that God is Oneness. God is unity: wholly indivisible, entirely unique, and utterly indefinable. God resembles nothing in either essence or attributes.”¹⁰

The concept of Tawhid, then, may provide an explanation for the transcendence of Allah, but can it also reconcile God’s transcendence and immanence that we find in the Trinity? In my book, *The Guide to Answering Islam*, I explain how the concept of Tawhid is totally foreign to the concept of the Trinity.

For Muslims, Allah is totally “other” from mankind or creation, and so cannot be a father, or have a son, or have any associates. This is the reason that Muslims have such difficulty with the Christian concept of the Trinity. If Allah is an absolute unity, then how could the one God also be three Gods? For Muslims, this belief in the Trinity adds something “other” than God to God, which is blasphemy. In fact, to claim that Jesus Christ is God’s son is the greatest of all sins in Islam and is known as “shirk,” or the worship of anyone or anything other than the one God.¹¹

Sam Solomon, a Christian scholar, highlights the differences between Tawhid and Trinity in his book, *Not the Same God*, where he argues

... notwithstanding many apparent similarities, the Allah of Islam as expressed in the Doctrine of Islamic Monotheism (i.e. Tawheed) is the diametric opposite of the Triune Lord God of the Bible – opposite in nature, character, knowability, description, and

⁹ Reza Aslan, *No god but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam* (NY, Random House, 2005), 151. (emphasis his).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 150.

¹¹ Daniel Janosik, *The Guide to Answering Islam* (Christian Publishing House, 2019), 101.

attributes.... The Qur'an, although seemingly innocent, has as its main objective to undo the message and mission of Christ.¹²

Thus, while Tawhid allows for the transcendence of Allah, this is insufficient in comparison with the Trinity which allows for both transcendence and immanence. According to Christian doctrine, unless God can be immanent in our world then he cannot be the savior either. In the forward to Sam Solomon's book, *Not the Same God*, Colin Dye explains how the God of the Bible differs from the Allah of the Qur'an:

There can be no confusing the God of the Bible with the Allah of Islam. The God of the Bible is transcendent and immanent, infinitely exalted above and beyond his creation, yet everywhere present in his creation. Allah is not. The God of the Bible is knowable. Allah is not. The God of the Bible seeks relationship with humanity, created in his image. There can be no relationship with the Allah of the Qur'an. The idea that humanity is made in the "image of God" is "*shirk*." According to Islam, it is the unforgivable sin of idolatrously imputing partners, associates, or associations with Allah. The God of the Bible is the God of covenant relationship. Allah is so removed, above and beyond the created world, that he could never, under any circumstances, bind himself in covenant with anyone or anything.¹³

Finally, Nabeel Qureshi eloquently explains how the Muslim concept of Tawhid is fundamentally incompatible with the Triune God of the Bible:

Christians worship a Triune God: a Father who loves unconditionally, an incarnate Son who is willing to die for us so that we may be forgiven, and an immanent Holy Spirit who lives in us. This is not what the Muslim God is; it is not who the Muslim God is; and it is not what the Muslim God does. Truly, the Trinity is antithetical to Tawhid, fundamentally incompatible and only similar superficially and semantically. Muslims and Christians do not worship the same God.¹⁴

¹² Sam Solomon and Atif Debs, *Not the Same God: Is the Qur'anic Allah the Lord God of the Bible?* (Wilberforce Publications, 2016), 20, 21.

¹³ Sam Solomon, *Not the Same God*, 14-15.

¹⁴ <http://rzim.org/global-blog/do-muslims-and-christians-worship-the-same-god>. See also Nabeel Qureshi, *Answering Jihad: A Better Way Forward*, (Zondervan, 2016), 116.

Either the Muslim Allah is the true God, or the Christian Yahweh is the true God, or neither is true. As the Law of Non-Contradiction teaches, they both cannot be true. Therefore, how can we continue saying that “the Allah of Muhammad is also the Father of Jesus”?

God is Too Holy for Sin

Perhaps the main reason that Muslims and Christians cannot say that they believe in the same God is due to the key difference in holiness between Allah and Yahweh. Yahweh demands perfect holiness. Allah, on the other hand, allows imperfect people to try to justify their holiness by their works and mere forgiveness from Allah. This demonstrates that Allah’s holiness is not an infinite holiness but rather a limited holiness. Matt Slick, a Christian apologist, explains this further:

In Christianity, God is far too holy to accept the sincerity and repentance of a person so as to forgive that person of his or her sins. But in Islam, a person’s sincerity and repentance are sufficient to warrant forgiveness – if Allah so grants it. Why the difference? The difference is due to the fact that God has revealed in the Bible that his Holiness is so complete and so perfect, and that our sinfulness is so pervasive, that even our sincerity and our repentance are touched by sin and are not acceptable to him. Because sin has touched all of what we are: our hearts, our minds, our intentions, our wills, our emotions, etc., our efforts just can’t be good enough.¹⁵

How, then, can Muslims say that Allah is holy if he forgives sins with no acceptable basis? If the God of Islam accepts the Muslim’s works and repentance, which are stained with sin, then how can Muslims claim that Allah is holy? Matt Slick explains how this dilemma is at the core of our question on whether Allah of Islam can be considered holy.

In Christianity God provides for us the very forgiveness that our sincerity and repentance cannot bring. If our salvation, if the forgiveness of our sins could come by anything that we do, then Jesus did not need to die on the cross (Gal. 2:21). But it was necessary that Jesus, who was God in flesh and second person of the Trinity, provide for us what we could not accomplish. Only in Christianity is the infinite love of God manifested so

¹⁵ Matt Slick, “How Holy is the God of Islam?” December 12, 2008. <https://carm.org/islam/how-holy-is-the-god-of-islam/>

completely that he humbles himself and loves us so much that he took our place of punishment to ensure salvation. This is good news for Christians. But, the Muslim has no such good news. He is stuck with the uncertain hope that maybe, just maybe, his own sincerity and repentance might be good enough to warrant forgiveness from his God.¹⁶

Reaching Out To Muslims

In 2 Corinthians 5:20-21, the apostle Paul writes that Christians are “ambassadors for Christ,” with God working through us to reach out to non-believers. Verse 21 provides the reason that as ambassadors we have something to share: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” This is the key message we have to share with non-Christians and especially Muslims, for they will never “become the righteousness” of God because they do not know the true God, and their sins will remain. They don’t realize that due to the God of the Bible’s infinite holiness, which prevents him from allowing anything unholy in his presence, there is no amount of good works or penitent pleas that that will sway God to allow them to reside in his heaven. In addition, because Muslims worship a god who is an absolute singularity (Tawhid), there is no opportunity for them to have a relationship with Allah. The apologist Andy Bannister points out that “Allah is not a personal God. Allah is never present with his followers. Always distant, but not because he is holy, but rather because he is wholly other.”¹⁷

Therefore, we can reach out to Muslims with two very powerful arguments. First, if they want to have a relationship with God, then they need to realize that Allah can never provide them with any kind of fellowship. Since Allah is totally “other,” and always distant, there is actually no basis at all for a relationship. For a forever relationship, they need to come to the triune God who shares his eternal relationship with us. Of course, in order to enter this relationship, the

¹⁶ Matt Slick, “How Holy is the God of Islam.”

¹⁷ Andy Bannister, *Do Muslims and Christians Worship the Same God?* (IVP, 2021), 129-130.

Muslim needs to accept Jesus as his Lord and Savior. With this step, he would need to realize and accept that Jesus is God himself, and that as God the Son Jesus died on the cross in our place. Then, through the imputation of righteousness granted by that act, we can stand in the presence of the Holy God since we would now be counted as being holy and worthy through Christ.

Thus, we first need to help Muslims understand that Allah is not holy because he would allow sincerity and repentance to be sufficient to warrant forgiveness. True holiness demands perfection and purity. Through the gospel, we know that only Jesus Christ, as God the Son, can provide the perfection and purity that we need. Therefore, in order to be in the presence of a holy God, we need to be holy; and in order for us to be holy, we need to be in Christ, so that his holiness becomes ours. There is no other way.¹⁸

¹⁸ See John 14:6. Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.