

The Fiqh Council of North America

Was Jesus a Muslim? By Dr. Robert Shedinger

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By Dr. Ahmed Afzaal

If asked this question, Muslims would immediately and emphatically respond in the affirmative. Of course he was a Muslim, they would say, since he was a noble prophet and a messenger of Allah (SWT). Indeed, they would see this question as a typical “nobrainer,” for even a Muslim child could answer it correctly without too much thinking. But what if this question was aimed not at Muslims but at Christians? How would contemporary American Christians respond to the question “Was Jesus a Muslim?” While many Christians won’t even understand the question, there is at least one Christian scholar who clearly says that the answer is “yes.”

Prof. Robert Shedinger is a scholar of religion who teaches at Luther College in Iowa. He earned his Ph. D. in religious studies from Temple University, specializing in Biblical Studies. While doing his graduate work, Shedinger took two courses on Islam with Prof. Mahmoud Ayoub, not because he had any personal interest in Islam but only in order to strengthen his job prospects. Shedinger thought that taking those courses will allow him to teach an introductory course on Islam, an ability that will improve his chances of getting a teaching position. He was proven right when he was hired soon after graduation by Luther College. Immediately after 9/11, however, Shedinger found himself in a new

situation. In the small Iowa community where he lived and taught, he was seen as the only local “expert” on Islam; he became, rather reluctantly, a much sought-after speaker on a subject that was, in fact, well outside of his field of expertise. Shedinger responded to this challenge by developing a new and genuinely deeper interest in Islam. Shedinger’s subsequent research led him to make fresh discoveries not only about Islam and Muslims, but also about the very nature of religion. He came to the conclusion that American Christians have very little sense of what Islam is truly about, and that this deficiency is at least partly responsible for maintaining the image of Muslims as a threat to Christianity and thereby fueling the “clash of civilizations.” Moreover, since they tend to have a narrow view of the place of religion, most Christians lack a true appreciation of Jesus’ own revolutionary teachings, as recorded in the Gospels.

Shedinger is now a man on a mission: while maintaining his own Christian faith, he wants to educate his fellow Christians about the teachings of Islam, explaining to them that their fear of an “Islamic threat” is seriously misguided. He wants to show them that some aspects of the Islamic view of Jesus are actually closer to the historical truth than what is often taught by the Christian denominations as official Christian dogma. Shedinger argues that if Islam is understood as a religiously inspired movement for social justice, a thesis for which there is ample evidence, then it would become much easier for Christians to appreciate the many commonalities that exist between the teachings of Jesus and Muhammad

(peace be upon them).

At the same time, Shedinger wants to accomplish a radical change in the Western understanding of religion. He agrees with many Muslims who claim that Islam cannot, and should not, be seen as a “religion” in the commonly understood sense. By studying the works of several modern Muslims, particularly those who emphasize the importance of social justice as an essential part of faith, Shedinger has reached the conclusion that a sharp separation between the public and the private spheres is incompatible with the Islamic ethos. If this is so, he argues, then Islam represents a challenge to the narrow and truncated understanding of religion that is prevalent in the modern Western academia as well as in the minds of most Christians.

Outside the academia, Shedinger feels that there is much room for cooperation between Christians and Muslims in the area of social justice. The Christian-Muslim dialogue will tremendously improve in both quality and effectiveness if the emphasis is shifted from doctrinal issues (e.g., whether or not Jesus was the Son of God) to issues of social justice and of practical efforts for achieving it. He contends that the differences in theological doctrine have a very long history, and it is not possible to resolve them simply through an interfaith dialogue. On the other hand, if attention is focused on those teachings of Jesus and Muhammad (peace be upon them) that are of practical significance, particularly those that unequivocally call for the establishment of social justice, then Christians and Muslims would

not only find a great many relevant issues to discuss but also the motivation to work together.

Shedinger's book *Was Jesus a Muslim?* is primarily addressed to Christians.

However, the importance of his book for American Muslims cannot be overestimated. Particularly for IONA, this book should be a required reading for all members. *Was Jesus a Muslim?* not only confirms and clearly articulates the basic idea that animates our efforts, it also provides much evidence from Christian sources that the same idea is the central message in the teachings of Jesus (peace be upon him) as well. This book, therefore, provides the tools necessary for building bridges between Muslims and Christians, more specifically between those Muslim and Christian groups that are involved in faith-inspired struggles for social justice. Such groups could increase their effectiveness many fold by pooling their resources and developing close partnerships. By doing so, they would also contribute to defeating the fear mongers who are trying to promote the "clash of civilizations."

Before we could get to that point, however, we need to cultivate a greater and deeper understanding of each other's religious traditions. As Muslims, we already know that the Christian tradition originated from the same divine reality that is the source of our own Islamic tradition; this is true even though there are many aspects of the Christian tradition that we Muslims find unacceptable. And yet, the Qur'an frequently speaks about Christians in highly approving terms, indicating that outside of their faith community Muslims will find the greatest affinity with Christians. This means that religious disagreements do not

preclude respect and cooperation. The differences between Muslims and Christians are real and considerable, and such differences are not going to disappear overnight. In fact, Muslims believe that it is only Allah (SWT) who is going to bring all disputes and disagreements among human beings to their final end, and that this will happen only on the Day of Judgment. We should understand, therefore, that it is not for us to try and eradicate all religious differences in this world. Our Islamic duty is to invite, not to convert; we are obligated to convey in the most beautiful fashion, not to force acceptance. We are supposed to represent the truth of Islam through our lives and deeds, our behavior and etiquettes. Guidance is in the hands of Allah (SWT) alone; no human being has the power to guide anyone, no matter how sincerely or ardently he or she may wish. This much is perfectly clear to any serious student of the Qur'an.

Of course, Muslims and Christians are not going to agree on everything, just as Muslims do not agree with other Muslims on all issues and Christians do not agree with other Christians. Having acknowledged our differences, however, can we still find enough common ground to cooperate in matters on which we do agree? Can Christians and Muslims join hands in matters of piety and virtue? If yes, then what could be more pious and more virtuous than the struggle for social justice? If the essential message of Jesus and Muhammad (peace be upon them) is the same, as Muslims have always believed and as some Christians are now beginning to recognize as well, then nothing should prevent us from cooperating with each other insofar as we

recognize that commonality. Of course, we must set aside our egoistic desires and our prides in order to build such solidarity. All collective endeavors require the sacrifice of the ego, and a joint Christian-Muslim struggle for social justice would be no exception.

Toward Christian-Muslim Solidarity for Social Justice

If Jesus returned today and considered the way that Muslims and Christians have co-opted him as an authoritative or—in the case of Christianity—the authoritative figure in their respective traditions, how might Jesus react?

Would he find more sympathy with his Muslim or with his Christian portrayal? Christians generally will reply that the historical Jesus would find the Christian portrayal of him—the risen Christ sent to earth in the form of God’s unique Son to redeem the sins of humanity—as the one most consistent with his historical identity.

But I question this. Despite the fact that I myself bring a Christian perspective, I firmly believe that the life and works of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels resonate more with particular interpretations of the nature and essence of the Islamic tradition than with common Western articulations of the nature and essence of Christianity. It is in this hermeneutical sense that I conclude that Jesus was really a Muslim. Such an idea has profound implications for Christian-Muslim relationships in the contemporary world and moreover will raise the intriguing question of whether the concern so often expressed over the politicization of Islam in the contemporary world ought to be replaced by a concern with the “religionization” of Christianity.

Making such an argument will not be easy, and it is tempting to dismiss the question “Was Jesus really a Muslim”

as little more than a gimmick, not worthy of serious academic engagement. Let me assure the reader that

I take this question as a substantive and serious academic topic and urge consideration of the world in which we

now live. Tensions between the so-called Christian West and Muslim East show no sign of abating anytime

soon. Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington has even predicted (and possibly even advocated for) a

“clash of civilizations” between Islam and the West. International tensions like these inevitably spill over into

the lives of ordinary people, leading to local tensions and even acts of violence between Christians and Muslims.

Today more than at any time in recent history we need a global movement of solidarity to emerge between Muslims and Christians, a movement with the promise to promote a just world order. But a new world order of justice and peace will not arise from a “clash” between Islam and the West; the “clash” mentality of the neoconservative political movement will lead only to greater levels of violence and injustice as it tends to create the very clash that it seeks to analyze. Rather, the world is in dire need of a movement of Christian-Muslim solidarity. I am hopeful that such a movement is possible, but only if Christians and Muslims (but Christians in particular) are willing to rethink in fundamental ways long-held assumptions about the relationship between Islam and Christianity, and between religion and politics more generally. Positioning Jesus as a point of commonality between Muslims and Christians may be a first step toward this goal, and this book seeks to accomplish just that.

Robert Shedinger. 2009. Was Jesus a Muslim? Questioning Categories in the Study of Religion, pp. 11-12.