



*Between Allah & Jesus:
What Christians Can Learn
from Muslims*

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“Take advantage of this unique opportunity to learn more about the morals and values of Muslims. Through the moral, intelligent and open-minded Muslim young man ‘Isa, you will learn not only about Islam, but you’ll come to a greater understanding and security in your own Christian faith.”

—Dr. Nabeel T. Jabbour, professor and author of *The Crescent Through the Eyes of the Cross*

On Comparative Religions

It was Tuesday evening and time for my World Religions class. There were twenty-four students, half of them adults and half of college age, with a good ethnic mixture. Two students sat together in the middle of the front row: ‘Isa, a Muslim, and Zvi, a Jew with a black beard, dreadlocks and a yarmulke. These two asked most of the hard questions and made most of the trouble, and I loved them for it. . . .

The class was beginning their twenty-minute break in the middle of the long, three-hour class. . . . Suddenly, Zvi asked me, pointing behind my chair, “What is that cross on the wall behind you?”

I turned around to look. On the pale blue cinder block wall behind my desk, six feet above the floor, there was a foot-high cross of paint that stood out in darker blue. . . . I opened my mouth to answer Zvi’s question, but the Holy Spirit interrupted me in the form of a friendly, fat Irishman who was sitting next to Zvi, who explained, “Oh, that’s where the crucifix used to be. They used to have one in every classroom. And then they took them down. And they haven’t repainted the walls yet.”

Zvi turned to him. “When did they take them down?”

I wondered why he said “when” instead of “why.” I soon found out. “Just last year, I think,” was the answer.

“I thought so. It was the Bundy money,” said Zvi. . . .

Zvi explained that not long before, President Johnson’s secretary of state, McGeorge Bundy, had negotiated a compromise on the divisive issue of federal funding going to religious schools so that the issue would not have to go to the Supreme Court. The compromise was that these schools could get federal grants as long as they were not “sectarian” and “exclusive.” What that meant was deliberately left undefined. Zvi pointed out that in the year following this ruling, almost all of the twenty-one Jesuit colleges in America, including Boston College, had taken down their crucifixes from the classrooms.

The Irishman protested this explanation as much too cynical. “We wouldn’t do that for *money*. . . . We did it to be ecumenical.”

At this point ‘Isa chimed in. “What does that mean, *ecumenical*? Can you define that term?” . . .

Once again I opened my mouth to answer, and once again the Holy Spirit interrupted, this time from the mouth of a nursing student in white stockings sitting behind ‘Isa. . . .



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She said something vague like “*Ecumenical* means we reach out to everybody, everybody’s welcome here, and we don’t want to offend anybody.”

“*Offend* anybody?” ‘Isa asked sharply. “Who? Who did you fear to offend? . . . You mean people like me? A Muslim? And my friend the Jew? . . . Well, I for one am very much offended,” ‘Isa declared. The class hushed. . . . “Because you have called me a bigot.”

“No, no, no, we would never do that. We hate bigotry. When did we ever call you a bigot?”

“When you took down your crucifixes.”

“That’s ridiculous. We took them down because we hate bigotry. We took them down because we didn’t want to look like bigots. Why in the world do you say *that* was calling *you* a bigot?”

“Let me try to explain it to you,” answered ‘Isa. “Suppose you came to a Muslim country and enrolled in a Muslim university. Would you be offended by the quotations from the Qur’an in Arabic that you might see on the walls?”

“Of course not.”

“Why not? Because you are not a bigot. Only a bigot would be offended by a Muslim symbol in a Muslim university, or a Jewish symbol in a Jewish university, right? . . . So why did you expect me to be offended by a Catholic symbol in a Catholic university? Only because you expected me to be a bigot.” ‘Isa was silent for five seconds to let the logic sink in. Then he drew the logical corollary: “And I think *that’s* being a bigot: expecting the other person to be a bigot. So I am offended.” . . .

‘Isa didn’t let it go at that. He went on. “You know, we Muslims don’t have statues or pictures of any person, not even the Prophet Muhammad (blessed be his name!) or the prophet Jesus (peace be upon him!). We believe that is forbidden by God’s commandment against making graven images. But if we did have pictures of our prophets, we would never take them down—not for money, not for anything, and certainly not for fear of offending some bigot.

“In fact, if we had pictures of our prophets, and soldiers came into our classroom with guns and demanded that we take down the pictures of our prophets because there was a new law and a new regime in power that demanded it, we would never do it. Every good Muslim in that class would run to the pictures and defend them with his life. We believe that martyrs, who die for Allah’s honor, will go to Paradise. We would consider it a great privilege to die for the honor of one of our prophets, especially for the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him!) or for the Prophet Jesus (blessed be his name!).”

‘Isa had everyone’s total attention. He was turning around and facing them. He was the teacher now. “Tell me,” he asked, “how many of you are Christians?”

Everyone’s hand went up, except Zvi’s. “So tell me, do you really believe that Jesus is the

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Son of God? How many of you believe that?”

Again twenty-two hands went up, most of them hesitatingly.

“Well, we Muslims don’t believe that. We believe that that idea is pagan and idolatrous and blasphemous and ridiculous. But we do believe that Jesus was a great prophet, and he spoke the Word of God, and he was virgin born, and he performed miracles, and he even raised the dead, and he will come again to judge the world at the end of time. The Qur’an says all that about Jesus.

“So we revere him and we honor him, and we would never remove his pictures, if we had them, not for money or for fear of offending anyone, not even for fear of death. And you say you believe he is the Son of God, yet you take down your pictures of him just for fear of offending us.”

At each step of ‘Isa’s sermon the silence had grown more intense. He paused, then concluded: “So I think we are better Christians than you are.”

The unavoidable logical conclusion felt like a blow to the gut. Everyone was profoundly uncomfortable. It was the most memorable lesson of the whole course. I silently thanked God for sending a prophet to us.

—From chapter one, “On Comparative Religions,” *Between Allah & Jesus*