

# Comparing and Contrasting Islam with Christianity

## Jesus, the Qur'an, and Muhammad

Muslims revere the Qur'an as the "earthly center" of Islam, much the way that Christians revere Scripture as central to the faith. Muhammad is deemed worthy of profound respect and is a human being without divinity. Muhammad is regarded by Muslims as the most perfect example of humanity at its very best. Jesus also serves as a model for Christians and is often regarded as the example for humanity, but Christians hold that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine.

## Art and Devotion

Islam does not permit any artistic representation of Allah, because it offends Muslims' sense of the absolute transcendence of Allah. Artistic representations as aids to devotion and sometimes as a form of devotion have flourished in most forms of Christianity. Because God chose to become incarnate in the human person of Jesus, artistic embodiment has received the Church's blessing. Statues of Jesus and the saints in Catholicism, icons in the Eastern Orthodox churches, and paintings such as Michelangelo's work on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel enhance Christian devotion. For Muslims, calligraphy that artistically records the words of the Qur'an, and verbal repetition of the Ninety-Nine Names of God, serve similar purposes. Some Protestant Christians share Islam's wariness of artistic images, fearing that they can be used in an idolatrous manner.

## The Umma and the Body of Christ on Earth

There are similarities between the Islamic Umma (community) and the Christian conception of the Church as the Body of Christ on Earth. Both are believed to transcend all human boundaries and to be based on the will and action of God/Allah. Both religions also acknowledge that the ideal community is not always realized on earth. An important difference is that the Umma, ideally, is a political reality as well as a religious one, while the Church is not regarded as a political unit in Christianity. For the Umma to be fully realized on earth requires that the law of the land be in accord with Islamic Shari'a law. The Christian Church has no parallel requirement.



## The Imam and the Pope

There are both similarities and differences in the role of the Imam in Shi'i Islam and that of the Pope in Catholicism. Both are believed to have unique spiritual insight and authority, and to derive their role from God/Allah, albeit in different ways. The Church plays a much more central role in the selection of a Pope than any Muslim group plays in the selection of an Imam. There is also no parallel in Catholicism to the concept of the hidden Twelfth Imam in Shi'i, nor to the political meaning of the Imam for Shi'i Muslims.

## Attitude toward Other Traditions

The attitude of many Muslims toward non-Muslim religions parallels that found in Catholicism. Both state that their religion is the final, complete Revelation of God/Allah, meant for all people. Both, however, also affirm that other religions contain genuine expressions of the divine will and are capable of guiding people in living a good life. Islam especially honors Judaism and Christianity as other "religions of the Book," sources of genuine Revelation.

