Opinion
Spirituality



An Iraqi man carrying a cross and a Quran attends Mass at Mar Girgis Church in Baghdad July 20, 2014. (CNS/Ahmed Malik, Reuters)

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August 25, 2017

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As the country sits transfixed with one of the strangest, divisive and most unpredictable presidencies in the history of the United States, lost in the madness has been the increase in Islamophobia since Donald Trump was elected president.

Islamophobia, defined as "unfounded hostility towards Muslims and therefore fear or dislike of all or most Muslims" has become frighteningly commonplace in the U.S. and this hatred and misinformation has found fertile soil in the past eight months of the Trump presidency.

The Council on American-Islamic Relations has documented 451 incidents that stemmed from anti-Muslim bias between April 1 and June 30, 2017, 15 percent of which were acts of violence against Muslims. This represents a 91 percent increase in anti-Muslim hate crimes during that time compared to the same time period in 2016.

These crimes occur in a conducive environment. A Pew Research Center survey in 2017 rated Muslims at 48 degrees, the lowest on a 0-100 "feeling thermometer" out of nine religious groups in the United States, two points lower than atheists. Particularly negative feelings towards Muslims were harbored by Republicans and those who were Republican-leaning.

The irony here is that most Americans really have no idea what is in the Quran, the Muslim equivalent of the Bible, beyond the mostly negative and out of context soundbites they hear on talk radio, cable TV or the internet. They have no idea that the three monotheistic religions that follow the same Abrahamic tradition, namely that Abraham was the first prophet of God, are Judaism, Christianity and yes, the third sibling, Islam.

All three religions were born in the Middle East and are inextricably linked to each another. While Christianity was born from within the Jewish tradition, Islam developed from both Christianity and Judaism. In fact, Islam sees itself as the culmination of the Abrahamic faiths, the final revelation by God in the monotheistic tradition.

The Quran specifically protects Jews and Christians as Peoples of the Book, the "Book" meaning revelations from God to Jews and Christians which gives them a spiritual connection to Islam.

As such, Islam recognizes as prophets many of the figures revered by Jews and Christians, including Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. For Muslims, Muhammad is not a divine being. Instead he is a prophet through whom God delivered his message and an example of piety to emulate. Muhammad is not the equivalent of Jesus in the Islamic tradition, rather it is the Quran that occupies the same central position in Islam as Jesus does in Christianity.

It would surprise many to know that the Prophet Muhammad is only mentioned a total of four times in the Quran while Jesus, the son of Mary, is mentioned 25 times and Moses 136 times. The Quran dedicates a whole chapter to Mary, who is the only woman mentioned by name in the sacred text.

The Islamic version of the Jesus story especially, is quite similar to the Christian version. Jesus is variously referred to as "Spirit from God, "Word from/of God"), "Prophet-Messenger of God," and the "Messiah" who will come back on the Day of Judgment to destroy the Antichrist.

Beginning with his birth, Muslims believe that Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary in a miraculous birth ordained by God. The Quranic verse says:

> "Relate in the Book the story of Mary, when she withdrew from her family, to a place in the East. She screened herself from them; then We sent to her Our spirit (angel Gabriel) and he appeared before her as a man in all respects. She said: 'I seek refuge from you in God Most Gracious (come not near) if you do fear God.' He said: 'Nay, I am only a Messenger from your Lord, to announce to you the gift of a pure son.' She said: 'How shall I have a son, when no man has ever touched me, and I am not unchaste?' He said: 'So it will be, your Lord says: 'That is easy for Me; and We wish to appoint him as a sign unto men and a Mercy from Us: It was a matter so decreed.' " (Quran 19:16-21).

The Quran also relays how Jesus spoke in the cradle: "Then she (Mary) pointed to him. They said: 'How can we talk to one who is a child in the cradle?' He (Jesus) said: 'Verily! I am a slave of God, He has given me the Scripture and made me a Prophet." (Quran 19:29-30).

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The miracles performed by Jesus were not limited to his cradle according to the Quran. Muslims believe Jesus performed miracles throughout his life: "Then will God say: 'O Jesus the son of Mary! Recount My favor to you and to your mother. Behold! I strengthened you with the Holy Spirit (the angel Gabriel) so that you did speak to the people in childhood and in maturity. Behold! I taught you the Book and Wisdom, the Law and the Gospel. And behold: you make out of clay, as it were, the figure of a bird, by My leave, and you breathe into it, and it becomes a bird by My leave, and you heal those born blind, and the lepers by My leave. And behold! you bring forth the dead by My leave.' " (Quran 5:110).

Naturally there are theological differences between Muslims and Christians regarding Jesus but there are far more similarities and these similarities are what should be emphasized in order to show the common ground between these two faiths, which together represent 4.1 billion followers worldwide and 55.3 percent of the world's population.

The importance of finding common ground has become particularly apparent after the events in Charlottesville this month, which laid bare real and deep divisions in our country. Reconciling Christianity and Islam based on a true understanding of each other's religions could serve as a bulwark against these divisions and provide a worldwide example to emulate.

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A version of this story appeared in the **Sept 22-Oct 5, 2017** print issue under the headline: Similarities in Islam, Christianity are found in Jesus.