Question 1—What are the differences between Christianity and Islam?

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You can divide differences between these two religions in various ways. My favourite way is between the core differences that will always remain and cultural differences that have developed over time and could theoretically either change or be overcome. These changes could take place within either Christianity or Islam or within both.

The core difference between the two religions centres on a complex set of ideas about God, humanity, sin and salvation. Muslims fulminate against the notion of the Trinity and emphasize the unity of God exclusively. The thought of God having a son is the ultimate blasphemy to them. However, Jesus *is* a revered prophet, second only to Muhammad. They reject the notion of original sin—as do some major Christian traditions. They also reject the need for a mediating saviour. God just forgives—if He pleases. God has not bound Himself to any promises and is free to decide everyone's ultimate destiny. He will weigh everybody's deeds, but remains free to reject or accept each individual. Though there is no ground for assurance of salvation, in practice, Muslims do not seem to live in constant fear of hell. They emphasize that, though God is absolutely free, he is also the Merciful and Compassionate. These differences have been there from the beginning and will never disappear. This is where the basic antithesis resides.

The Muslim attitude to sin is, in my estimation, superficial and often results in hypocrisy. I believe this helps explain why they seldom admit to wrongs. While they castigate the West for imperialism and intolerance, they seldom if ever recognize their own imperialism and intolerance and are not prone to apologize. They complain about intolerance in the West, while their (ancestral) home

countries are shot through with it. They accuse the West of racism, while racism is rife on their ancestral turf. They persecute Christians in their countries of origin and destroy churches, but demand freedom of religion for themselves in the West. Admittedly, they have no monopoly on hypocrisy; it just comes in different shapes and forms for different people. While core difference here is permanent, these results could potentially change due to internal shifts or to the influence of Western tolerance.

Then there is the issue of church and state. While almost all Christian traditions support the separation of church and state-- not to be confused with the separation of *religion* from politics/state-- Muslims tend to insist on the unity of state and mosque. They see the state as the handmaiden of Islam that supports the latter's institutions, pillars and mission, including financially. That is a major reason for violence in Nigeria.

As to historically conditioned differences, Muslims themselves often point to Western *secularism* as the most crucial difference. For today's Western Christian, secularism is almost our "native air" with which we have grown up and become accustomed to. It has deeply penetrated our hearts and mind. Secularism confronted Muslims in the context of oppressive colonialism. Hence, to Muslims it has always been a hostile and ungodly worldview. Although there are secular Muslims, most Muslims have resisted the influence of secularism much more than have Christians. Many have contempt for its adherents, especially for its Christian adherents. They hold secularism responsible for Western moral decadence and tend to be angry at Western attempts to impose this corrupt system on them in the context of imperialism and globalism. I do not consider this a core difference, for at its core Christianity is also anti-secular, even though most Christians have been unduly influenced by it.

Over against secularism, Islam is a *wholistic, comprehensive* religion that covers all of life, *theoretically* much like the Reformed Christian tradition. They are not shy about praying in public or dressing differently and are not averse to making public demands on issues that wimpy Western Christians have long surrendered to secularism or shoved with embarrassment into a hidden "religious" corner of life. Islam is a political religion that insists on using the organs of state, United Nations, corporations and all other structures, even its oil money, for its advance. Politics, economics, education—all of life is of one piece and all of it is to be harnessed to the global Islamic mission. In reaction to Western secularism, Muslims have in recent decades revived and strengthened their wholism, while most Christians have at least partially cashed in theirs for a semi-secularism. Christians can learn some powerful lessons from Muslims in this regard with respect to our politics, culture and personal lifestyles, including decreasing modesty in our dress codes.