

Title:

**The Johannine “I AM” Statements in light of Islam’s
denunciation of Jesus being the Son of God**

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Introduction

Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world today with over 1.5 billion adherents as of 2005, and counting.¹ Its reach into Western Civilization through birth and migration strategies have caused alarm in certain quarters, leading to caricatures, provocative documentaries, and calls for moderation. But the challenge of Islam rests in its strong adherence to the beliefs enshrined in the Qur'an, brought to humankind through the faithful messenger Muhammad and regarded by all Muslims to be the true word from God which is undefiled and undistorted by Jewish or Christian hands. The challenge to the Western world is, as Huntington once said, was not so much the clash of nations, but of civilizations, cultures and ideologies.² The challenge to Christians today is to respond with an authentic message of the identity of Christ in the sea of posits that Islam has brought forth. This paper will attempt to look at the identity of Jesus in view of the seven self-proclamations listed in John's Gospel, and compare it with Islam's understanding of its teachings and role of Muhammad. The outcome is that Christ's claims as God are in direct opposition to the teachings of the Qur'an, but in order to share this truth with the Muslims, genuine love for others is needed.

Definition of 'I am'

John's use of the 'I am' predicate nominative, Burge says, is the same as the divine name of God uttered on Mount Sinai to Moses in Exodus 3.14, and therefore its use in the Gospel was to disclose Christ's divine identity.³ However, the traditional understanding of the 'I AM' statement is merely existential. According to Knight, the translators of the LXX, coming from the Hellenized city of Alexandria, showed their 'unexamined prejudice for the philosophical approach to religion' by translating the Hebrew "name" of God as *ego eimi ho on*, rendering the meaning more towards a neo-platonist slant of a God who exists ("I am the existent One" or, in the Vulgate, "I AM WHO I AM") as

¹ ----, "Major Religions of the World Ranked by Number of Adherents," in *Adherents.com*; available from http://www.adherents.com/Religions_By_Adherents.html#Islam; Internet; accessed 23 May 2008.

² Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" in *Foreign Affairs*; available from <http://www.foreignaffairs.org/19930601faessay5188/samuel-p-huntington/the-clash-of-civilizations.html>; Internet; accessed 23 May 2008.

³ Gary M. Burge, *John*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 148.

compared to the original Hebrew meaning, which should be rendered as “I declare that I will become *with* you.”⁴

With this knowledge, the revelation of Jesus’ identity as the “Immanuel” (Mt 1.23) or “God With Us” becomes so much more important. His is an identity of an immanent God, a God that walked with His people and understood their struggles. This is also further echoed in the Commission of Christ before His Ascension, that “Lo, I will be with you until the end of the age.” (Mt. 28. 20) The ‘I am’ of the Old Testament does not just imply an existential understanding of a God who is present, but it establishes the truth that God is infinitely involved in the affairs of His people. This fact differentiates the God of Islam with Christianity because the Islamic God is transcendent, high above His creation. When Muhammad refused the teaching that Jesus is God (Surah 5:72), he was passionately asserting his conviction about "the boundless existential chasm which lies between Almighty God and his creatures" which eventually led him to the unequivocal rejection of the doctrine of the Trinity, a view that was "founded ultimately on his absolute inability to see it any other way." ⁵

⁴ George A.F. Knight, *I AM: This is My Name* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), 29-30.

⁵ Imad N. Shehadeh, “Reasons for Islam’s rejection of biblical Christology,” *Bibliotheca sacra* 161, no 643 JI- (S 2004): 275.

Identity of Jesus in John through 'I am'

There are seven 'I am' sayings of Christ in John. These include Jesus being the Living Water; Bread of Life; Light of the World; The Gate and the Good Shepherd; the Resurrection and the Life; The True Vine; and The Way, the Truth and the Life. To sum these statements up, it can be said that the Jesus in John's Gospel is portrayed as the Life Giver.⁶ Ball also states that the 'I am' sayings are soteriological in function and serve to indicate how Jesus is the source of life. Morris comments:

'It is only because there is life in the Logos that there is life in anything on earth at all. Life does not exist in its own right. It is not even spoken of as made "by" or "through" the Word, but as existing in him'.⁷

Therefore, through these seven 'I am' statements, we see how Jesus offers living water to the woman at the well (4.10, 4); how he gives people the bread of life (6.35); how he gives of his life so that his sheep might have abundant life (10.10); he also claims that he himself is the Life (11.25; 14.6). Also, Jesus gives Light (8.12; 9.5), nourishment (6.35; cf. 15.1); protection (10.9, 11) and a relationship (10.14; cf. 14.7). He is also the source for the resurrection (11.25), truth (14.6) and guidance. The other sub-clauses point to his life-giving nature- light of life (8.12b); the Door being the entry point to salvation (10.9); and as the Resurrection and the Life, Jesus offers life beyond the grave (11.25b) and as the True Vine, he offers fruitfulness.⁸ As Ball states, through the 'I am' sayings, the author of the Gospel wants the reader to "find life by believing that such life is in Jesus (1.4), is from Jesus (10.10) and is Jesus (11.25; 14.6)".⁹ It is also emphasized that this life is only in Jesus and in Jesus alone that the readers may come to the Father (14.6) and thus salvation (10.9).¹⁰

As mentioned, the ability to give life is a divine prerogative and it is only because of Jesus' unique relationship with the Father that he can give life (5.26). This claim is rejected by the Muslims on the grounds of polytheism and that Jesus was not the Son of

⁶ David Mark Ball, *'I Am' in John's Gospel: Literary Function, Background, and Theological Implications* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 283.

⁷ Ball, *'I Am' in John's Gospel*, 283.

⁸ Ball, *'I Am' in John's Gospel*, 283.

⁹ Ball, *'I Am' in John's Gospel*, 283.

¹⁰ Ball, *'I Am' in John's Gospel*, 283.

God. In Okorie, Jesus's deity is affirmed because they show "an historical theophany of the eternal being of God".¹¹ Jesus' deity would also imply that he is naturally of the same essence of God, the Father, Eternal and Almighty (14.9).

Not only is Christ encapsulated as the Divine Logos in the seven statements, he is also known to be the Word of God personified. In Tebbe, Zwemer refers to Christ as the word of God, claiming that all other religious books will be 'wood, hay and stubble' when the Christ comes again to cause all kingdoms to become the kingdoms of God and of His Christ.¹² Zwemer goes on to say that this Word of God is Christ and the 'word of God' in the Bible, thus setting up a framework in which to compare the Bible with the Qur'an and leading to the necessary comparison between the Qur'an and Jesus as diametrically opposing factors.¹³

How Islam views Jesus and Muhammad

Christians are said to reject Muhammad as a prophet. Shehadeh states that Islam views Muhammad as the last of all the prophets.¹⁴ Christians claim that it is difficult to accept another prophet after Jesus Christ who talks about Jesus Christ differently from the way they do (which their understanding is based on biblical writings).¹⁵ Also, Christians have traditionally compared Muhammad to Jesus and claimed that Jesus is greater than Muhammad, thus rendering Muhammad not worthy of being called a prophet.¹⁶ But the problem lies in the fact that "for Christians, Jesus has always been more than "just" a prophet (Heb 1:1-2), and that for Muslims Muhammad never claimed to be more than "just" a prophet."¹⁷ Any such comparison between the both individual is ultimately

¹¹ A.M. Okorie, "The self-revelation of Jesus in the "I am" sayings of John's Gospel," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 28, no 5 (O 2001): 487.

¹² James A Tebbe, "Comparing Christ and Qur'an: A Brief Theological History and Assessment of Liabilities," *International Review of Mission* 88, no 351 (O 1999): 415.

¹³ Tebbe, "Comparing Christ and Qur'an," 415.

¹⁴ Shehadeh, "Reasons for Islam's rejection of biblical Christology," 274.

¹⁵ Joachim Wietzke, "Encounter between Christians and Muslims," *Missions Studies* 8, no 1, (1991): 36.

¹⁶ Wietzke, "Encounter between Christians and Muslims," 36.

¹⁷ Wietzke, "Encounter between Christians and Muslims," 36.

pointless. It is clear that the Koran does say that Jesus is "God's Word and Spirit;" but it does not say this about Muhammad."¹⁸

Nonetheless, Muhammad being revered by his followers, is said to have titles such as "Upon him be the peace and blessings of God," "the Lord of mankind," "the Apostle of God," "the Choicest of mankind," "the seal of prophets," and that great mystical title, "the Perfect Man" who is the Divine Logos.¹⁹ He is described as the Prophet to whom was the gate through which people, stirred by life's hurricane, "would rise and affirm that God went on his knees and came within human focus."²⁰

Muslims believe the message (*risàia*) of the envoy (*rasùl*), knowing that although he was not a redeemer himself, the divine message he brought them would lead them to salvation- a message of divine ordinances that was authoritative and would deal with all areas of life, worship and the social sphere.²¹

It is without a doubt that the Koran provides Muslims with the origin and the center of their faith, the right guidance through God's revelation.²² And any statement about the union between Jesus and God will remain offensive to Muslims because it is rejected in principle in the Koran, and the Koran is considered by Muslims to be the final and authoritative written revelation of God.²³ For the Muslims, the Koran is the Word of God just as Jesus Christ is the "Word of God made flesh" (Jn 1:14) and if one wants to compare the center of the Muslim faith with that of Christians, one has to compare the Koran with Jesus and not Jesus with Muhammad, as stated earlier.²⁴ Muhammad is the prophet who "receives" the Koran in a miraculous way, just as Mary "receives"

¹⁸ Wietzke, "Encounter between Christians and Muslims," 36.

¹⁹ Lamin O. Sanneh, "Muhammad, prophet of Islam, and Jesus Christ, image of God: A Personal Testimony," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 8, no 4 (O 1984): 170.

²⁰ Sanneh, "Muhammad, prophet of Islam, and Jesus Christ, image of God," 173.

²¹ Wietzke, "Encounter between Christians and Muslims," 36.

²² Wietzke, "Encounter between Christians and Muslims," 36.

²³ Wietzke, "Encounter between Christians and Muslims," 36.

²⁴ Wietzke, "Encounter between Christians and Muslims," 36.

(conceives) Jesus; thus for Muslims the confession of their belief in God is inextricably bound up with the prophetic ministry of Muhammad.²⁵

Response

It is therefore important to understand that the claims of Islam and Christianity are at even odds with each other. The claims of Christ, being inextricably divine in nature and point not just to the Way, but indicate that he himself IS the way, differ diametrically with the claims of Muhammad, who merely states the ordinances as he has received them from the Angel. Islam never sets out to deify their prophet, whereas Christianity exalts Christ as the source *of* and *for* life to all men. The varied claims of these two men are seen in the light of revelation, as Jesus embodies the very revelation spoken of, whereas Muhammad serves to bring corrective measures to what has already been revealed, undeniably attempting to remove the deity of Christ within the Godhead. And although claims are made to the similarities of these two religions, Christianity preaches Christ crucified but Islam preaches unswerving adherence to dogma.

The people are justified by their actions and their adherence to the teachings of their prophet- implying perhaps that Muhammad could have been any other well-mannered and cultured individual; whereas the identity and uniqueness of Christ, brought out so masterfully in John's Gospel, will long remain in the records of history as the self-proclaimed Savior of the World, because of his divine nature shown through his signs and the divine calling which has been issued, a calling originating from Heaven no less. His nature therefore is the differentiating factor between the two faiths, indicating that he was the first (and last) man-God/God-man.

²⁵ Wietzke, "Encounter between Christians and Muslims," 36.

Conclusion

What then is the task before the Church in relation to the Muslim world? Rahbar suggests that Christian scholarship be used to help in the initiation of Muslim scholars in the modern discipline of the study of universal history as a unity, and thus assist to liberate Muslim scholarship from the study of Muslim history in isolation from the histories of the surrounding communities.²⁶

Secondly, Christians should stop criticizing and bringing down the shortcomings of Muslim society in the hopes of drawing more 'converts' as each religion can make justifications for the systems to which humans of these so-called 'divinely'-ordained systems function. Therefore the best way to bring about a mutual understanding between these two faiths is to ensure that Christians live exemplary lives, lives which show forth the true love and spirit of Christ himself, "then the world will know that you are my disciples." (13.35)

²⁶ Muhammad Daud Rahbar, "Muslims and the finality of Jesus Christ in the age of universal history," *Ecumenical Review* 17, no 4 (O 1965): 367.

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