

The Muslim Jesus

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [January 11, 2011](#) issue



A Persian Muslim depiction of the Sermon on the Mount.

Every couple of years I have the opportunity to teach a "special topics" course at Piedmont College—a onetime offering that may appeal to a broader audience than the regular religion courses listed in the catalog. Sometimes I choose a subject I know something about, like Christian mysticism or the Gnostic gospels. This fall I chose a subject I only half knew about: Jesus in the New Testament and the Qur'an.

It sounded like such a simple, straightforward project—promising students better information and more opportunity for critical thinking about differences between Christianity and Islam than they were getting anywhere else in their lives. First we would focus on the four portraits of Jesus in the New Testament; then we would turn to the pertinent verses of the Qur'an to get a panoramic look at Jesus. At least that was the plan when I conceived the course.

When it came time to choose textbooks, the extent of my naïveté began to dawn. Even after I had found readable books by generous Christian and Muslim scholars

(including Michael Lodahl, Mahmoud Ayoub and Mathias Zahniser), it became clear that we could not adequately compare passages from the New Testament and the Qur'an without first exploring the provenance, voice, content and role of those texts in the two great faiths they represent. To skip this step would be like serving students a plate of southern fried chicken alongside a tureen of *Khoresh-e fesenjan ba jujeh* (Persian pomegranate stew with chicken) and asking them which one tasted better.

In order to become even marginally more educated tasters we spent the first half of the semester comparing Christian and Muslim views of revelation (one focuses more on a person, the other more on a book), Christian and Muslim views of God (one counts to three, the other stops at one) and Christian and Muslim experiences of scripture (one reads God's word in translation, the other hears God's word recited in the original language).

We learned why it is difficult to read the Qur'an (one book received by one prophet over 23 years) alongside the New Testament (a library of 27 books written by at least ten authors over some 50 years). We recognized the difference between a sacred text that arose from a community of faith (as the early church decided what would be in the New Testament) and a sacred text that produced a community of faith (as the revelation of the Qur'an created the first Muslim *ummah*). By the time we got to the material about Jesus, most of us knew how much we did not know, which was a great help.

The big surprise was how much time and ink Muslims have spent thinking about Jesus—not just the contemporary writers we read but also the historic commentaries they cited. While a few students came to class aware of Jesus' status as a major messenger of Islam, others had not supposed that the Qur'an had anything nice to say about him. Yet there he was, in Qur'an and commentary--the word of God, bearer of the gospel—the Messiah born of the Virgin Mary, ascended to heaven and expected to return near the day of judgment to help defeat the forces of evil.

Then again, there he was *not*—not the son of God, not crucified or resurrected—which is to say, not divine and therefore not essential to the economy of salvation—insisting that he never taught anyone to worship him. Yet students who might have taken umbrage at these omissions in the beginning were by now able to recognize the differences between Christian and Muslim views of salvation (one relies on a mediator, the other holds each believer accountable) as well as Christian

and Muslim reverence for Jesus (one worships him as savior, the other venerates him as sinless exemplar).

In short, we could not get to Jesus without going through the origins of the two faiths that share him, along with their views of God, nature, revelation, faith, salvation and eschatology. No one in this class is ever likely to argue that all religions are alike. At the same time, the consensus is that Christianity and Islam disagree about the same Jesus. In the memorable words of Mathias Zahniser, the two faiths are "standing apart on common ground."

What I am left wondering is how the students will fare with their new insights after class is over. During this semester alone they have heard plenty of polemic both in the news and in the dining hall about the proposed *masjid* near Ground Zero, the plans of a church in Florida to burn the Qur'an, the bomb plot by a Somali teenager in Oregon, and the retaliatory fire set at the *masjid* he attended. The students' efforts to correct misinformation have not always been welcomed, and even they may have doubts about their motives.

As their Christian teacher, I am both glad the semester is over and freshly aware that the effort required for this course is the bare minimum for those who wish to know more about their neighbors than either their uninformed hopes or fears can provide.