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**CHRISTIANS DON'T HAVE A CHRISTMAS MONOPOLY ON JESUS. MUSLIMS HONOR HIM TOO.**

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In his first and only official visit to an American mosque, seven years into his presidency, former President Barack Obama articulated something American Muslims know all too well: "A lot of Americans have never visited a mosque," he said, adding that "most Americans don't necessarily know — or at least don't know that they know — a Muslim personally" either.

In total, there are only three or four million Muslims in America, which means we're just about one percent of the population. It's hard to get a word in edgewise, even though we as a country seem to be talking about Muslims all the time. There's lots of talk, but hardly ever any listening to actual Muslims.

This might be why most Americans don't know much about Islam, or don't know they know much about Islam. And yet, in my experience, when Americans do learn a little bit about the Muslim basics, Islam goes from a something menacing and foreign to something remarkably familiar. And this happens to be especially true when it comes to Christmas.

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Last summer, for example, I was teaching a class about Islam. We were discussing a simple story in the Qur'an, a dialogue between Mary and the Archangel Gabriel. It goes something like this:

Gabriel, an otherworldly visitor, arrives in the form of a human being to tell Mary that she is pregnant with child. But not just any child; this is the Messiah, Jesus, the son of Mary and messenger to the children of Israel.

Mary reacts in confusion, of course □ how can she have a child when no man has touched her? But most of all she reacts with horror and despair. If she really is pregnant, that means she's an unwed woman in a patriarchal society. Making matters worse, this child has a very special spiritual mission. Try explaining that to your traditional friends and family.

When I shared this story, a few students' eyebrows went up, and stayed up for the rest of the class. Jesus, they asked, is in the Qur'an? He's the Messiah and his mother is the Virgin Mary? I might as well have told them pigs could fly.

But that's just it. For Americans, raised as we are in a Judeo-Christian milieu — whether we accept, reject, or amend it — Islam shouldn't feel out of place in the least.

Muslims and Christians do disagree about who Jesus is: Christians believe him to be the divine Son of God while Muslims consider him a very special human and a prophet to whom God granted miracles. Just like Christians, however, Muslims believe Jesus had no father (for us, since Jesus isn't divine, we believe he was created by God in his mother's womb.) We also believe Jesus was the word and spirit of God, and will someday return to fill a volatile world with goodness.

In other words, Christians and Muslims both love him. And his mother too. Jesus is particularly important in Sufism, the Muslim spiritual science, where he's viewed as a paragon of abstemiousness and mystical wisdom and taught in sermons and prayer circles all around the world.

Whatever you believe, it's hard to deny that Jesus didn't shape the world we live in.

As Christians everywhere await Christmas, a wider awareness of these spiritual and theological similarities might make Islam seem less alien. Instead of something weird and menacing, what if Americans viewed it as a belief system with deep roots here in the U.S., and a lot in common with our nation's largest religion?

The way I see it, whether anti-Muslim animus shrinks or grows in the next few years, the importance of Jesus for American Islam will only increase.

Of course many Muslims, including me, don't celebrate Christmas — but we'll continue to honor Jesus. Maybe some Muslims will choose to emphasize their particularities, including our understanding of Jesus. Some Muslims might even double down on the common ground and adopt Christian practices in the name of our shared traditions. Maybe they'll come to believe that a Muslim spin on Christmas could reduce Islamophobia.

To be an American Muslim is to be a kind of political football, a wedge issue on which, it seems, the fate of Western civilization is being decided. (This reality is both flattering and unnerving considering how few Western Muslims exist). In Europe, the fear of Islam helped drive the resurgence of the far-right, even as it helped push Britain out of the European Union. In America, as Philip Klinkner found, one of the easiest ways to find out if someone supported Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump during the 2016 presidential election was to ask voters whether they thought Obama was a Muslim.

I can't help but wonder what traction this conspiracy theory would have gained had more Americans known more about Islam. If Americans were more informed, for example, they might have known that even if Obama were a Muslim, he would still have believed in Jesus. He also would have believed in the divine origins of the Gospel (and the Torah) and in Mary, a single mom who carried the weight of the world in her womb.

Which is a really roundabout way of wishing you all a very merry Christmas. Whatever you believe, it's hard to deny that Jesus didn't shape the world we live in.

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