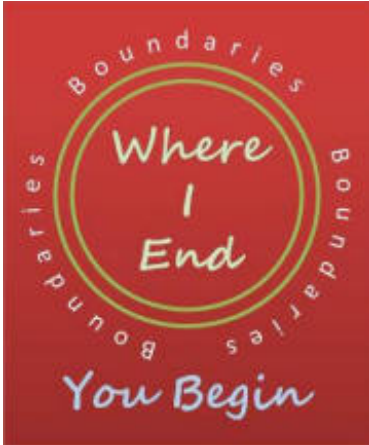


## Searching High and Low for Common Ground

by Ahmed Afzaal

Mike Huckabee, former Arkansas governor and 2012 presidential hopeful, is being taken to task in the blogosphere for some comments he recently made on *Fox and Friends*. The controversial remarks appeared in the context of his criticism of two Protestant churches that are allowing local Muslims to worship in their facilities. In defending his position, Mr. Huckabee provided more ammunition to his opponents when he suggested that Islam was “the antithesis of the Gospel of Christ.” The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) is calling on Mr. Huckabee to apologize for his offensive remarks.



The word “antithesis” means the *exact opposite* of something; in the science of rhetoric, it denotes the counter-claim that directly contrasts the original proposition (called *thesis*). I cannot be fully certain of what Mr. Huckabee meant; however, when I read his statement that Islam was “the antithesis of the Gospel of Christ,” I understood it to mean that these two religious traditions stood in a starkly contrasting relationship of thesis and antithesis; that they were being seen as

more or less incompatible and mutually exclusive, lacking in any common ground.

Regardless of how this particular media storm plays itself out, I am curious about how many Americans actually share with Mr. Huckabee the notion of Islam being “the antithesis of the Gospel of Christ.” Given the influence of the religious Right, I suspect that the number is not insignificant. Against this background, I do not believe that further criticizing Mr. Huckabee will produce any positive outcomes; even if he were to retract his comments there would remain millions of Americans who would continue to think in this way. I would rather explore the logic of the belief that Islam and Christianity constitute incompatible and mutually exclusive traditions, and to speculate on the social function of this belief in the contemporary United States.

That there are large areas of difference and disagreement between the Christian and Islamic traditions is obvious and indisputable. Yet, to start from a straightforward recognition of this difference and disagreement and to somehow end up with the notion of Islam being “the antithesis of the Gospel of Christ” seems to involve an enormous and unwarranted leap in the reasoning process. This leap requires exaggerating the differences between the two traditions, coupled with a more or less deliberate disregard for all that they hold in common (which, I suggest, is quite substantial).

In the interest of fairness, I should acknowledge that this notion of an unbridgeable gulf between the Islamic and Christian traditions is at least as common among Muslims as it is among Christians. In both cases, however, I am inclined to think that this belief did not originate in the realm of theology *per se*. This is because there is sufficient room in both Christian and Islamic theologies to recognize the presence of truth, albeit partial, in the other religious tradition. As soon as Christians and Muslim realize that they share at least part of their religious beliefs and values with the other, they can no longer justify the use of the term “antithesis.” Consequently, the claim that Islam is “the antithesis of the Gospel of Christ” indicates either a profound *ignorance* of both the Islamic and Christian traditions, or a conscious *decision* to deny and disregard their many similarities.

While there are important theological divergences between Islam and Christianity, I am inclined to think that the notion of the two traditions being *antithetical* to each other is not itself a theological belief. Rather, the roots of this belief are found elsewhere.

As is well-known, all human beings have a need *to belong*, a need for *identity*, and a need to live in *community*. Insofar as we fulfill these needs in and through religion, we draw our sense of identity from religious symbols, we use religious beliefs and practices as the basis to form communities, and we experience the satisfaction of belonging by participating in communal life. It goes without saying a community, whether it is based on religion, race, ethnicity, territory, language, or something else, must establish *boundaries* that distinguish and separate its members from everyone else. This leads to the social construction of “in-group” and “out-group” distinctions, allowing us to develop the concept of a unified “we” and to think of everyone else as constituting some amorphous “they.”

The phenomena noted above are part and parcel of the human condition, and are not, in themselves, deleterious to human flourishing. Trouble begins to appear, however, when we start to take our communal boundaries too seriously; this is likely to occur whenever we feel worried, anxious, or fearful in relation to our needs for safety and, particularly, to our perceived ability to have access to “scarce” resources. A scarcity mentality and a competitive attitude make us unusually concerned that there may not be enough to meet all of our needs. We start to worry about taking care of “ourselves,” and begin to think that “they” may take away what belongs to us. At this point, deep-seated biological instincts of self-preservation kick in, and we begin to fortify the boundaries of our community by exaggerating the distinctions between the “in-group” and the “out-group.” One way of exaggerating these distinctions is, of course, by making appeals to our *religious* differences. This, I believe, is what is going on in significant sections of both Christian and Muslim communities.

As I have suggested above, it would be very difficult to make a purely theological case for the claim that Islam is “the antithesis of the Gospel of Christ.” Such a case would be, in my opinion, extremely shallow and flimsy, regardless of whether we look at the matter from a Christian perspective or from an Islamic one. Furthermore, any *comparative* study of the Islamic and Christian traditions, if carried out with sufficient depth and integrity, would reveal so much agreement on fundamental questions as to render the claim of their mutual incompatibility quite empty and meaningless. There is simply too much overlap between the Islamic and Christian traditions to allow any serious student of religion to designate them as “thesis” and “antithesis.”

At the same time, it is perfectly possible for intolerant Christians and Muslims to “cherry pick” the data in order to prove, at least to their own satisfaction, what they already believe to be the incontrovertible truth, i.e., that the two traditions share no common ground at all. This is because there is more than sufficient evidence in both traditions that can be used to highlight the large areas of difference and disagreement that undoubtedly exist between them.

Strictly speaking, the question that Christians and Muslims are facing today is not so much theological as it is *political*. If we wish to maintain our distinctive religious identities, and there is no reason why we shouldn't, then we must maintain recognizable communal boundaries that unequivocally distinguish those of us who are “Muslims” from those of us who are “Christians.” Having established these boundaries, we ought to jealously guard them as well. We would, however, still need to make a crucial choice: Do we wish to build our communal boundaries so high that we can't even see what's on the other side? Or do we wish to build our boundaries relatively low so that we can come to know and love our neighbors? Needless to say, there is room in both religious traditions to justify either of these choices, though I am personally of the opinion that the latter choice would be far more authentic from both a Christian and an Islamic viewpoint.

If we choose to make our communal boundaries as high as possible, it would make perfect sense to exaggerate our religious differences. On the other hand, if we choose to build relatively low communal boundaries, then we would naturally give significant attention to our many similarities, without compromising our differences.

The existence of the belief that Islam is “the antithesis of the Gospel of Christ” is a sign that many people are making the former choice. On the other hand, the presence of countless inter-faith initiatives, including the decision by the two Protestant churches to allow local Muslims to worship in their facilities, indicate that many other people are seeing the value of making the latter choice.