

ISLAM AND CHRISTIANITY: A Comparative Analysis of Doctrine and Life (in part)

From: Answering Islam – A Christian/Muslim Dialogue

Christianity and Islam share much common ground. Both trace their roots to Abraham. Both believe in prophecy, God's messengers (apostles), revelation, scripture, the resurrection of dead, and the centrality of religious community. This last element is especially important. Both Christianity and Islam have a communitarian dimension: what the church is to Christianity the "umma" is to Islam.

Despite these significant similarities, however, these two world religions have a number of significant differences as well. I would like to comment on these -- not to engage in any kind of polemic (since I consider polemic a sign of religious immaturity) but to foster better understanding. A true dialogue between religions can be built only on nuanced understanding and not caricature.

I -- The Understanding of God

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Muslims and Christians believe there is only one God / Allah. The basic testimony of Islam is called the 'shahada', the first clause of which states that "la ilaha illa Allah" -- "There is no god but God." This is certainly a statement that Christians would affirm.

But how Christians and Muslims conceptualize God in their respective theologies is actually quite different. The emphasis in the Islamic theology of God can be summarized by one word: 'tawhid', which means "absolute unity." Muslims insist that there is no distinction within the Godhead. God is sublimely one. Thus the Islamic polemic against Christianity has centered on the doctrine of Trinity. This is the central doctrine that causes problems for Muslims when they consider Christianity. Muslims have caricatured Christians as tritheists guilty of "shirk", that is, attributing an associate to God. By believing in the Trinity, Muslims say, Christians believe in three gods. This attitude is expressed in the Qur'an:

Say not "trinity", Desist. It will be better for you. For God is One God (4:171).

They do blaspheme who say: God is one of three in a Trinity, for there is no God except One God (5:76).

But every one who knows Christian theology well knows that the

doctrine of Trinity was articulated precisely to oppose the idea of believing in three gods! Apparently the understanding of the Trinity was very inadequate among the Christians with whom the earliest Muslims interacted. Early Muslims, therefore, came to understand the Christian doctrine of the Trinity in very distorted, inadequate terms. It seems that some even believed that Christians worshipped Mary as part of the Trinity! This misunderstanding of the Trinity found expression in the Qur'an itself:

And behold, God will say; "O Jesus the Son of Mary! Didst thou say unto men, "Worship me and my mother as gods in derogation of God?" (5:119).

It seems that in the era of the Qur'an it was assumed by many people that the Trinity was the Father, the son Jesus, and Jesus's mother Mariam (Mary)! So the Trinity was misunderstood.

This is not to place blame on the people back then. The Trinity is not easy to understand; in fact, it is an ineffable truth, not graspable by the human mind. How many heresies in Christian history have arisen because people attempted to detract from the mystery of the Trinity, coming up with doctrines that were more easily "digested" by the human mind. No, the doctrine of Trinity cannot be reduced to the pale categories of human reason. It is arrogant for anyone to think that he or she can grasp the mystery of the Godhead! So the fact that the doctrine of the Trinity is not readily understandable in terms of human reason should not worry us. This is what the proper Christians response should be to any polemic against the doctrine of the Trinity. We, in all humility and submission to God can only say this: God has revealed himself as Trinity, i.e the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. We do not rationally understand this; any explanation that we come up with will be flawed. But since God has revealed Himself as Trinity, we submit to Him as Trinity even if we do not completely understand how he can be Trinity! It is blasphemy to "reduce" God to something we can understand. The purpose of theology is not to "cut God down" to the size of human reason but to elevate human reason to the contemplation of the Divine Mystery -- the Mystery which teaches us that the One God -- ineffably, incomprehensibly -- exists in three Persons.

Perhaps the best way to enable our Muslim friends to understand why we believe that God must be a Trinity is to emphasize Christianity's fundamental teaching regarding God, namely that GOD IS LOVE. Now, love can 'never' be exercised in

isolation. You cannot be all-loving and be alone. Love is manifested 'in relationship', and for that reason the God who is LOVE must exist within a "community within himself," that is, within a community of three Persons, among whom their mutual love is so perfect that they, though three, become perfectly One! This is the fundamental truth underlying the doctrine of the Trinity.

So do not try to come up with a rational explanation of the doctrine of Trinity to try to "prove the Trinity" to your Muslim friends. That is a waste of time. Rather, try to help them understand how affirmation of the mystery of the Trinity -- despite the limitations of human reason -- is part of the Christian's surrender and submission ('islam') to the God beyond all understanding! We surrender to the all-holy Trinity not because we can understand this sublime Mystery but simply because that is what God has revealed himself to be.

It is from this same perspective -- that GOD IS LOVE -- that we should try to explain how Jesus can be the Son of God. Such a statement is blasphemous to Muslims; they believe that God is "far above" having a son. On the contrary, Christians see the Sonship of Jesus not as a blasphemy but as a testimony to the divine love, which is so intense (again, beyond all human understanding) that God was not content only to bless his creation from outside of it. No, actually humbled himself to the point of becoming a part of his creation through the Incarnation of his Son Jesus Christ! By becoming part of the created order, by taking on a full and a complete human nature, God sanctified humanity "from within," so to speak. Both Islam and Christianity say that God is totally other and beyond human comprehension, completely beyond the ability of humans to grasp, yet Christians add something completely different: that God sanctified the world by deigning to become part of it, by loving us so much that he was willing "to come down from his throne" to become part of this mess which we call the world. In this bold -- and wonderful -- assertion, Christianity stands apart from both Judaism and Islam, which stress the total otherness and transcendence of God to the point where it is incomprehensible to them that He could become part of the created order.

We Christians must never lose sight of the fact that even though we are Trinitarian, we affirm that there is only "one God". In fact, the Orthodox Christians in the Middle East always say in Arabic: "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ONE GOD!" (in Arabic: "Bismilabi wal-ibni war-ruhi-l-quddus, ALLAH WAHID!"). This is to show that in affirming the Trinity, we do not deny in any way that God is one.

II -- The Understanding of Revelation :

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Christianity believes that God revealed Himself in order to redeem us, to save us -- that is to lead us to a fullness of life, freed from the bonds of sin both in this world and in the world to come. According to Islam, on the other hand, revelation is not for the purpose of redemption, but for the sake of "guidance". That is, God's revelation is meant to provide guidance for living in this world.

In Christianity, revelation is mediated. We believe that the Bible is the Word of God, but we do not believe that God mechanically transmitted it through certain people as if they were "channelers" of some sort. Christians hold that the Bible was written by human beings under divine inspiration, the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The divine revelation was thus "filtered" through a human lens and written in human words and within human history. That is why our scriptures refer to historical circumstances; it describes not some mystical, ahistorical revelation of God but rather chronicles God's wonderful intervention in human history.

In Islam, on the other hand, the Qur'an is considered the "unmediated" word of God. In other word, Islam stresses very strongly that in receiving his revelation Muhammad was illiterate-- and hence completely passive. He simply recited what was put into his mouth, without any input of his own. ("Qur'an" means "recitation.") The Qur'an -- which is seen as eternally existing in heaven -- simply descended (another name for the Qur'an is 'at-tanzil', "that which descended") and was expressed through Muhammad as a passive instrument of revelation. Anyone familiar with modern critical linguistic theory would have to question such a view. According to such theory, 'all' communication is mediated; as soon as a thought is put into words, it is mediated. The very fact that a thought is put into words means that it is "processed" and passed through a human lens, so to speak. The whole purpose of revelation is for God, whose thoughts are so far above ours, to mediate his communication to us through human language. God does not think in human language; to say so is to limit his omniscience, which is far beyond the constraints of human language! Thus Christians must call the Islamic view of "unmediated revelation" into question on both linguistic and theological grounds.

It should also be noted that Qur'an is much more a 'book-centered' religion than Christianity. It is wrong to assume that what the Qur'an is to the Muslim the New Testament is to the Christian. Not so! The appropriate analogy is this: what the Qur'an is to the Muslim, 'Christ himself' is to the Christian. We are not 'book'-centered; we are 'Person'-centered (that is, 'Christ'-centered)! Muslims say that the Qur'an is the Eternal

Word of God; but we do not say that the New Testament is the Eternal Word of God. Only "Christ" is the Eternal Word! Therefore be sensitive to Muslims. Never insult the Qur'an; to insult the Qur'an would be as offensive to a Muslim as insulting Christ would be to a Christian! By the way, Muslims, in affirming the eternity of the Qur'an, face a theological problem that is directly analogous to the one faced by Christians who affirm that Christ is the Word, existing from all eternity. Muslims ask us how we Christians can say that there is One God, who alone is eternal, and yet claim that Christ existed from all eternity. They accuse us of ascribing an associate to God in saying this. But they face the same problem in teaching the eternity of the Qur'an. How can one claim that something besides God -- namely the Qur'an -- exists from all eternity without ascribing an associate (in this case an object, rather than a person!) to God? It is interesting that both Christians and Muslims solved these parallel theological dilemmas in virtually the same way: Islam asserts that since the Qur'an is the Word of God, it always coexisted with God -- "as part of God," so to speak, since God could never be without his Word. We use the same reasoning in defending the Christian doctrine of the eternity of Christ: as the Word of God, Christ always existed with God the Father. Christ is co-eternal with the Father since God the Father could never exist apart from his Word! One Eastern church Father, Gregory of Nyssa, explained this mystery in this way: God eternally spoke his Word (namely, his Son). And when he eternally spoke the Word, there came forth eternally from his mouth the Spirit (namely, the Holy Spirit, "ruh ul-quddus"), by which the Word was spoken. (Breath, after all, is necessary for speech!) Thus, from all eternity, the Word and the Spirit co-existed with the Father! Islam claims the same thing about the Qur'an as the Word of God! Do you see the similarity in reasoning?

In short, while both Islam and Christianity affirm that God has spoken and revealed Himself to humankind, still there is one great difference: whereas Islam teaches that the Qur'an is God's Word to humanity, Christianity proclaims that Jesus Himself is God's Word to humanity. For Islam, therefore, God has spoken through a Book: for Christianity, on the contrary, He has spoken through a Person. In Islam, the written Arabic Book is the marvel; in Christianity, the Person of Christ is the true miracle! Christians believe that if Almighty God can reveal His will perfectly through a Book, as Muslims assert, surely He can do so even more perfectly and fully through a Person. For if God is a personal God, then a personal life would clearly be a far better means of revealing Himself than any Book, however excellent it may be.

We must also mention here another standard Muslim argument

against Christians: that their scriptures suffered corruption and distortion. This is called the doctrine of 'tahrif'.

Articulation of the doctrine of 'tahrif' began with the Qur'an itself. Islam affirmed the veracity of the earlier revelations given to the People of the Book; theoretically, they were fully consistent with the Qur'an. Jews and Christians, therefore, were urged to accept the revelation given through Muhammad:

O ye People of the Book! Believe in what We have (now) revealed, confirming what was (already) with you.(4:47)

And this is a Book which We have sent down, bringing blessings and confirming (the revelations) which came before it. (6:92)

When Jews and Christians brought arguments against Muhammad and his followers on the basis of what their scriptures taught, however, Muslims had to account for the discrepancies. How could the text of the Old and New Testaments contradict that of the Qur'an if the latter was a confirmation of the former?

A number of responses to the problem are found in the Medinan 'suras'. The Jews are accused of knowingly perverting the word of God after having heard and understood it (2:75). Some actually "write the Book with their own hands and then say, "This is from God"" (2:79); these "transgressors changed the word from that which had been given them" (2:59). Others corrupt the text by displacing words, changing them from their right places (4:46, 5:14), or by "twisting" their tongues and reading it incorrectly:

There is among them a section who distort the Book with their tongues. (As they read) you would think it is a part of the Book, but it is no part of the Book; and they say, "That is from God," but it is not from God. (3:78)

Of the Jews there are those who displace words ... and say: "We hear and we disobey ... with a twist of their tongues.... (4:46)

Moreover, the charge of concealment (ikhfa') is levelled against the People of the Book. They know the truth as they know their own sons, "but some of them conceal it (2:146); they thereby "swallow fire" and will receive a grievous penalty for their

duplicity (2:159; 2:174). "Why do ye clothe truth with falsehood," the People of the Book are asked, "and conceal the truth while ye have knowledge?" (3:71) Muhammad is depicted as coming to reveal to them much of what they used to hide in their Book (5:16). Jews are further chided for dismembering the Torah by making it into separate sheets "for show" while concealing much of its contents (6:91). Of Christians, it is said that "they forgot a good part of the message that was sent them" (5:15).

It was a creative way of trying to explain the discrepancies between the Qur'an and the earlier scriptures, but it has absolutely no basis in the manuscript tradition. Anyone who has studied the manuscripts of the Jewish and Christian scriptures knows that there is no evidence whatever for the corruption posited by the doctrine of 'tahrif'. In fact the manuscript evidence, if it establishes anything, establishes how carefully the texts of the Old and New Testaments were passed down!

III -- The Understanding of Sin and Salvation :

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Sin and salvation are central categories in Christian theology and spirituality. Christianity teaches that the effects of original sin have corrupted the world and the human beings who exist in it. In Islam, however, there is no such a thing as original sin. The Qur'an does indeed state that Adam and Eve sinned, but according to Islamic belief, they repented and were fully forgiven so that their sin had no repercussions for the rest of human race.

I believe the Islamic rejection of original sin is really the rejection of a 'specific understanding' -- what I would consider to be a 'narrow' understanding -- of original sin. Islam rejects the doctrine of original sin that asserts that all human beings inherited the guilt -- the culpability -- of the sin of Adam and Eve. This seems unfair to the Muslim: Why should we have to accept guilt for someone else's disobedience?

To respond to such a question, we Christians must move beyond a narrow Augustinian understanding of original sin, the view that "in Adam's fall we sinned all." The Calvinists later carried this view to an extreme, saying that the result of Adam's sin is total human depravity; that is, that original sin has made human beings completely incapable of doing anything good without the assistance of divine grace! Such a notion is thoroughly incomprehensible to

Muslims!

There are, however, other (in my opinion, better) understandings of original sin in the history of Christian theology. These can explain original sin to the Muslim inquirer in more palatable terms. Western Christians (both Protestants and Catholics) need to move beyond the traditional Augustinian-Calvinist understanding of original sin and look toward the ancient Christian East for what I would consider to be more satisfactory explanations. Eastern Christianity understands original sin in this way: No sin that is committed is without its effect. Every sin that you and I commit -- every sin that is ever committed -- disrupts the entire cosmos. Your sin has an effect not only on you but on everyone and everything else. Any sin that you and I commit has a reverberation throughout the world, throughout the cosmos. Every puff that you take on your cigarette pollutes the air that everyone else breathes, so to speak. So when the Old Testament claims that the sin of the father will be visited upon the children, it is not issuing a threat; it is simply describing reality. Think about this proposition, and I think you will recognize that it is true. Is it realistic to claim, as Muslims do, that Adam and Eve's sin -- the first of the human race! -- had no effects in the world into which all other human beings were born? I do not think so!

No, sin indeed has a "snowball effect": it accumulates throughout human history, impacting upon all who are born into the world. (Actually, we feel the effects of sin even before our birth, while still in our mother's womb!) What started this off was the sin of Adam and Eve -- the first, or original, sin in this process. For the Eastern Christians to say that all suffer the effects of original sin is not to say that all are "born guilty" but rather that all human beings have to deal with the powerful force of sin that has accumulated from the sin of our First Parents until the present day. If we explained original sin to our Muslim brethren in this way, perhaps it would be more understandable to them (and to us, I might add!).

Once one understands original sin in this way, I think the need for salvation -- the ability to break loose from the overwhelming bonds of sin that have grown stronger and stronger through the ages -- becomes evident. With sin's effects everywhere around us, we have an undeniable proclivity to sin; and no one of us sitting in this room this evening is capable of freeing himself or herself from sin's grip. Because Islam has understandably reacted against the deficient understanding of

original sin I described earlier, it has tended not to be receptive to this more realistic understanding of the pervasive effects of sin on all human beings. Thus, it sees no need for salvation; it cannot understand how Christ's death and resurrection brings salvation. "Salvation from what?" they ask. Just as it is unthinkable to Muslims that one person should have to shoulder the guilt for another person's sin, it is unthinkable that another person (in this case, Christ) would be able to pay the penalty for another person's sins.

Furthermore, because Muslims believe that prophets are sinless (this doctrine is known as isma'), it seems a blasphemy to say that Christ died the shameful death of a sinner on the cross. They therefore deny that it was Jesus that was crucified; they say that it was Judas (whom God made to look like Jesus so that he would suffer his rightful penalty for betrayal). Through such a story, Muslims see themselves as protecting the prophetic integrity of Jesus, since a true prophet, according to Islam, could not suffer the indignity that Jesus did. Muslims affirm that Jesus ascended to heaven but deny that he died on the cross.

But back to our main point: because Muslims do not recognize the universal and corruptive power of sin, unleashed as a result of original sin, they see no need for salvation in the Christian sense. If there is no sin that has a throttle-hold on you, you do not need to be saved from it. What you should do, according to the Islamic view, is to live a good life, pleasing God in all that you do. Submit to God and follow His directives. Religion, to the Muslim, does not mean salvation from sin; it means following the right path, or the shari'a, mapped out by Islamic law. While

Christianity is a faith concerned primarily with "orthodoxy," or "right belief," Islam is a faith concerned primarily with "orthopraxy," or right practice. It is a religion of law, and it sees Christianity's rejection of the Law (as taught by St. Paul in his writings, especially Romans and Galatians) as a serious deficiency in the Christian way of life. This, of course, does not mean that Islam is not at all concerned with right doctrine or that Christianity is not at all concerned with right practice. It simply means that the emphasis is different in the two religions.

But that difference in emphasis is very important. If one recognizes the pervasive power of sin, salvation is not just an option; it is a necessity. Christians lament the fact that a faulty presentation of original sin led early Islam to "throw out the baby with the bath water" with regard to their understanding of

sin. By reacting against an anemic understanding of original sin, as I have described it, they have missed what Christians consider to be the central truth of human existence: that no matter how hard one tries to conform to "right practice," he or she will fall short of the goal. We cannot live the kind of life that God wants by our own power.... And that is why salvation is necessary.

These matters, of course, are very profound, and I do not pretend to have exhausted what should be said about them. In this part of my presentation, I simply wanted to point to the divergent Christian and Islamic understanding of the crucial issues of sin and salvation.

IV -- The Religious Community :

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Let me conclude on a theme that reverberates in the hearts of both Muslims and Christians: religious community. What the church is to the Christians is what the "umma" is to Muslims. Christians and Muslims both consider themselves as accountable to a community of faith. It is not enough to believe in isolation; we must link our lives to brothers and sisters in the faith.

Nevertheless, there are some noteworthy differences between the Christian and Muslims visions of religious community. There is no ordained ministry or "hierarchy" in the Islamic umma. Also, in the Islamic umma there is more stress on homogeneity -- on a common pattern of life throughout the Islamic world, regulated by the 'sharia', or religious law -- than in the Christian church at large. Christians have attempted to "incarnate" Christianity as much as possible in local culture. For example, the Bible, hymns, and liturgical texts are translated into the local language and adjusted to the local culture. On the contrary, one must learn Arabic if one wants to be a good Muslim. The Qur'an is considered to be "untranslatable"; that is, to the Muslim the message of the Qur'an is inextricably link to the original language. Yes, one can attempt to render the text of the Qur'an in English, French, German, etc., but then it is no longer really the Qur'an, only an interpretation of it. Thus, when he did his famous translation of the Qur'an into English, the British convert to Islam, Marmaduke Pickthall did not call his work 'The Glorious Koran' but 'The MEANING of the Glorious Koran'. A translation is thus seen as a deviation. To the Muslim, Arabic is a sacred language; therefore one can perceive the perfection and inimitability (i`jaz) of the Qur'an only in Arabic, according to Islam.

Moreover, Muslims and Christians have different understandings of worship. Now, I recognize that it is difficult to talk about "Christian worship" as a single phenomenon because, as we all know, there are many, many different traditions of worship in Christianity. Different denominations worship in markedly different ways because they have all responded to different social and cultural contexts. In Islam, all Muslims worship the same way, throughout the world, with no significant variations, regardless of social and cultural context. In all fairness, it seems to me that there are strengths both to the Christian emphasis on adaptability and the Muslim emphasis on uniformity.

When discussing differences between Christian and Muslim worship, we should also note that Muslims are very attentive not just to the interior aspects of worship but to the external aspects as well. In this Muslims have much more in common with Eastern Christianity than with Western Christianity, especially Protestantism. Like Eastern Christians, Muslims use their whole body in prayer. Both groups, for instance, make prostrations before God in their worship. This seems strange to many Protestants, whose worship consists of sitting (or maybe standing from time to time) in a comfortable setting (on cushioned pews, in air conditioned churches, etc.) What one does with the body in most Western Christian worship seems almost unimportant. Not so in Islam. The submission of the spirit is symbolized by the submissive gestures of the body, made according to a ritualized pattern. Muslims have a much easier time, therefore, understanding the spirit behind the highly developed liturgical worship of the Eastern Christian than they do understanding what they consider to be the overly informal, unregulated worship of the Evangelical Christian. This, to me, is an interesting topic in Christian-Muslim relations that needs to be explored more fully in scholarship and inter-faith dialogue: Christians and Muslims need to examine more fully -- and more objectively -- the similarities and differences between their experiences of prayer and worship.