

Sin and Salvation in Christianity and Islam

1. INTRODUCTION

God, who created us and whom I serve and love more and more, allows me in His sovereignty to pass on to you the Biblical and Islamic teaching of sin and salvation. I count it as a great privilege to write to you on this most important subject. Before we examine the facts in detail let us look at the bigger picture. In doing so we shall realize that Muslims and Christians have a great deal in common. Perhaps this is the reason why the Quran speaks very highly of us Christians when it says, I quote Surah 5, Al-Maidah, verse 83:

'...And thou shalt assuredly find those who say, 'We are Christians', to be the nearest of them in love to the believers. That is because amongst them are savants and monks and because they are not proud.'

I am glad that the Quran uses the words 'amongst them' when it praises the Christians, because as it points out later and also as we see today, not all who call themselves 'Christians' are living up to their name. Many people who are born in what some people still call mistakenly 'Christian countries' are indeed far away from following Jesus. They practice adultery, homosexuality, drunkenness, do not care for their neighbours, and live in selfish ways. Together with practising Muslims, those Christians who practice their faith condemn all those horrible acts.

2. SIMILARITY IN BELIEFS

Indeed, the Muslim and Christian communities have a lot in common as far as the basics in the following areas are concerned:

God is one.

Jesus: '... the Lord our God, the Lord is one.' (Mar 12:29)

'...And say 'We believe in that which has been revealed to us and that which has been revealed to you; and our God and your God is One; and to Him we submit.' (Surah Al-'Ankabut, 29: 47)

God creates. (Gen 1-3, Surah Al-Baqara 2:22,30, etc)

God rules. (Psa 22:28, Surah Al-Sajdah, 32:6, etc.)

God reveals. (Amo 4:13, Surah Al-Nahl, 16:102, etc.)

God loves. (Joh 3:16, Surah Al 'Imran 3:135, etc.)

God judges. (Psa 9:8, Surah Al-Mumtahanah, 60:11, etc.)

God forgives. (Psa 103:3, Surah Al-Fath, 48:15, etc.)

God keeps his word from changing.

'.... There is no changing the words of Allah...'(Yunus, 10:65)

Since the Bible consists of the Torah, the Zabur, and the Injil, all of which are accepted by Muslims and Christians to be God's word, it cannot have changed according to the Quran. Other verses that confirm this important truth are found in Surah 3:48, 93; 5:43,47,66, 68-69; 7:159; 10:94; 19:12; 34:31; 35:31. Surah 2:75-85 and other verses accuse Jews of twisting

and misinterpreting the Torah with their words only. In Surah 4; 46 the Jews are accused of changing, writing down wrongly, what the prophet of Islam said.

Both, Christians and Muslims can emphatically underline the above statements, even though we may differ on the 'how' and the 'what' of the above. However, as an accepted rule of interpreting God's revelation in both communities, we always must look at apparent differences or contradictions in the light of ALL the verses in the Scriptures. Take for example the Christian and Muslim belief that God is One. Christians have been misunderstood by Muslims to believe in three gods. We need to look at this charge in the light of the following facts quoted above. According to both, Christianity and Islam,

God is one.

God's revelations cannot be changed. Therefore, Muslims should, and really cannot say that Christians believe in three gods otherwise they contradict both the Bible and the Quran. The only alternative is to look at passages that may give rise to the misunderstanding and explain them in the light of other, clear passages. That is exactly what Christians have done when they formulated the doctrine of the Trinity. They did this as a response to misunderstandings that arose from looking only at parts, instead of the whole revelation of God. In doing so they realized that for example time by itself consists of past, present and future. If any one of these is removed then universe and time will cease to be!

Fire generates heat and light. Thus fire, with its light and heat is one thing. Multiplicity in unity is a very common phenomenon. This kind of spiritual unity which reflects the Biblical understanding of the Trinity is distinguished from mathematical unity where $1+1+1 = 3$. In mathematical terms one could compare Trinity with $1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1$. "Further, some have pointed to the fact that Muhammad was simultaneously a prophet, a husband, and a leader. Why then should a Muslim reject the idea of a plurality of functions (persons) in God.' ('Answering Islam' Geisler&Saleeb p. 269)

The main stream of Christianity throughout the entire world believes in one God, the Holy Trinity. It is indeed a mystery, as God Himself is, and as eternity and infinity are. 'It is held that although the doctrine is beyond the grasp of human reason, it is, like many of the formulations of physical science, not contrary to reason, and may be apprehended though it may not be comprehended by the human mind.' (See, 'Encyclopaedia Americana', 'Trinity', by F.C. Grant, Danbury, Con.: Americana Corp., 1980)

The religion of Islam too faces such intellectual challenges. The Quran uses human terms to describe God. Orthodox Muslims do not explain the 'how'. Similarly, it is a fact that God's word was revealed in a book, but how the infinite can be expressed in the finite is not clarified.

Both, Christians and Muslims, believe in an Almighty, All powerful, All present, sovereign God who therefore cannot be known unless he makes himself known to us by revelation. This knowledge puts us in the right position of humility when dealing with the awesome subject of sin and salvation. The awareness that our knowledge of God is limited to that what he has chosen to reveal to us makes us realize that logic, the science of reasoning, of common sense play a limited role when it comes to the ways of God. In dealing with our subject we always must keep this God - given framework in mind: Both, Christians and Muslims, believe God is One and that his word cannot be changed. Whatever comes across our path that seems to say

otherwise must be understood in the light of the former two facts. If it is not we contradict our own fundamental beliefs.

3. QUARANIC VIEW OF SIN

In the Quran we find an awareness that human beings will be corrupt once they are created. About Adam we read:

And when thy Lord said to the angels: 'I am about to place a vicegerent in the earth,' they said, 'Wilt Thou place therein such as will cause disorder in it, and shed blood? -and We glorify Thee with Thy praise and extol Thy holiness.' He answered, 'I know what you know not.' Secondly, the following verses confirm the fear of the angels:

Iblis said, after disobeying Allah: '...I will most surely bring his (Adam's) descendants under my sway except a few.' (Surah 17, Bani Isra'il, verse 62)

In another account of the same story Iblis is reported to have said:

'Then will I surely come upon them (Adam's descendants)...and Thou wilt not find most of them to be grateful.' (Surah Al- A'raf, 7:18)

As our terrible history shows continually these verses came true and therefore it is very difficult to explain how in Islam human beings can be basically good in the light of all the horror they cause on a world wide scale.

Some parts of the Quranic account of Adam's sin reflect the biblical perspective. God made a covenant (Arabic *ahdan*) with him and with his descendants ((Surah Taha 20:115, Gen 9:9). Today there is almost no difference between the words 'covenant' and 'contract.' Both are broadly defined as agreements between two parties. If any one of them fail to meet the agreed conditions, the contract is cancelled. This is also the understanding of covenants and of marriage contracts according to the Quran. The relationship between a master and a hired worker as found in the Torah, Isaiah 16:13–14, 21:16 comes closest to this understanding.

However, God generally relates to men through a covenant, a word that has an entirely different meaning when read in the context of the Torah. This does not come as a surprise since language often changes with time. The word 'belief', for example, today means, 'not to be certain.' Someone may say, 'I believe tomorrow the weather will be nicer,' without having watched the weather forecast.

In the Injeel we read that faith is 'to be certain about what we do not see' (Hebrews 11:1). Therefore, when studying the message of God, it is important that we understand such words in light of their original meaning and not in today's sense.

The Hebrew word for 'covenant' is בְּרִית, 'berith'. It is derived from a root that means 'to cut,' referring to 'the cutting or dividing of animals into two parts, and the contracting parties passing between them, in making a covenant' (Easton's Bible Dictionary).

According to Jeremiah 34:18 those who did not fulfill the terms of the covenant, God "*...will treat like the calf they cut in two and then walked between its pieces.*" So far the words,

'covenant' and 'contract' are synonymous. However, the following passage from the Torah introduces a new element of ultimate commitment into the Biblical understanding. The story illustrates how God made a covenant with Abraham as he moved to a different country. While the Quran mentions, "...He (Abraham) said: 'I will emigrate for the sake of my Lord (Surah 29:26) we need to turn to Genesis 15 to find out more details:

⁵ *He (God) took him (Abram) outside and said, "Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be."*

⁶ *Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.*

⁷ *He also said to him, "I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it."*

⁸ *But Abram said, "Sovereign LORD, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?"*

⁹ *So the LORD said to him, "Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon."*

¹⁰ *Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other; the birds, however, he did not cut in half. ¹¹ Then birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away.*

¹² *As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him. ¹³ Then the LORD said to him, "Know for certain that for four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own and that they will be enslaved and mistreated there. ¹⁴ But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. ¹⁵ You, however, will go to your ancestors in peace and be buried at a good old age. ¹⁶ In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure."*

¹⁷ *When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. ¹⁸ On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, "To your descendants I give this land, from the Wadi of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates—¹⁹ the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, ²⁰ Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, ²¹ Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites."*
(Genesis 15:5–21).

Amazingly, it was God alone who passed in the form of a smoking firepot with a blazing torch between the cut pieces but not Abraham with whom the covenant was made! Both, the Bible and the Quran agree that God never ultimately breaks his covenant although he gives punishments to those who violate it (Psalm 89:34, Surah 2:80, 2 Kings 17:5-23). God illustrates this profound truth by comparing himself to a husband who marries an unfaithful wife, a prostitute and to the giver of an eternal inheritance (Hos 1-3, Eze 1:16, Jer 31:31-34, Heb 9:15-17).

³ *What if some were unfaithful? Will their unfaithfulness nullify God's faithfulness? ⁴ Not at all!... (Rom 3:3–4)*

As will be explained later, the reason for this extraordinary commitment is found in Himself alone and not in the feeble attempts of his people to do good deeds.

Having demonstrated his unconditional love, he asks those who believe in him to do likewise when they enter covenants with each other. They are to continue doing their share, "regardless of whether the other party keeps their part of the agreement. A violation of a covenant by one party doesn't matter as far as the other party's responsibility to continue to

do what they agreed to do." (<https://purposelydifferent.com/contracts-vs-covenants-why-the-difference-matters/>)

God was well aware of the risks and therefore allowed for certain measures of protection against human abuse. With regards to marriage covenants (Malachi 2:14) ⁸ *Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. ⁹ I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery."* (Mathew 19:8–9)

While God's definition of covenants is loving and merciful the question needs to be asked how he can be truthful to his other attribute of justice therein? It will be addressed later under the topic, 'Conclusion.' For now it is important to interpret the term 'covenant' the way God understands it.

In Surah Al'-Baqara, 2:40 we read:

'O children of Israel! remember my favours which I bestowed upon you, and fulfil your covenant with Me, I will fulfil My covenant with you, and Me alone should you fear.'

The corresponding word for covenant in the Injil, the Gospel is, 'testament.' That is why Christians call the Injil, 'New Testament'. Throughout His revelation God has made promises and given laws to his creation. When Adam and Eve sinned they violated the three following important aspects of the covenant:

A. The covenant is personal

God Himself gave the covenantal commands in the Bible (Exo 10:1-2) and in the Quran. (Surah Al-Ma'ida, 5:8-11) Therefore sin is the breaking of a relationship and disobedience or rebellion against God who is behind the covenant. (Isa 59:1-2, Neh 9:26, Psa 10:2-6. 51:4) This is confirmed when reading in the Quran about a tribe called 'Thamud' who disobeyed God's command given through a prophet called 'Salih':

'Then they hamstrung the she-camel and rebelled against the command of their Lord, and said, 'O Salih, bring us that which thou threatenest us with, if thou art indeed one of the Messengers.'

Surah Al-A'raf, 7:78, see also 73 where people who sin are said to have: 'rejected our signs', Surah Yunus, 10:16: 'disobey', Surah Qaf, 50:28-29: 'rebel', Surah Al-Furqan, 25:22: 'too proud of themselves')

B. The covenant is revealed

Both, the Quran and the Bible speak clearly about God who reveals His will to men. (Amo 4:13, Surha Al-Nahl, 16:102, etc.) Man can respond to revelation either with belief or disbelief. It follows that another definition for sin is disbelief in God. The Quran makes this clear when it says:

'Remember when thy Lord said to the angels, 'I am about to create man from clay; And so when I have fashioned him in perfection, and have breathed into him of My Spirit, fall ye down in submission to him.' So the angels submitted, all of them together. But Iblis did not. He behaved proudly, and was of those who disbelieved.' (Surah Sad, 38:75)

Not to believe in God and his commandments means refusing to allow God to be God in one's life. It means a refusal to acknowledge and trust God as God. God is selfishly and proudly replaced with self. One starts to believe in one self or somebody else. It is the purest form of idolatry, possibly the root of all sin which is equal to committing 'shirk' (associating partners with God, worshipping somebody or something else except God.

C. The covenant forms the basis of Law.

God's law is his revealed will made known through his commands. Therefore, the person that disobeys them transgresses the law.

'(Allah) taught man what he knew not. Nay! man does indeed transgress, because he thinks himself to be independent.' (Surah Al-'Alaq, 96:7)

Like the Bible (Matt 12:34, Luk 18:11-14) the Quran too recognizes that the heart attitude is more important than the external act of obeying the law. In Surah Al-Ma'ida, 5:4 Allah forbids the eating of certain kind of meat. However the verse finishes saying that in certain circumstances the forbidden becomes allowed:

'But whosoever is forced by hunger, without being wilfully inclined to sin, then, surely Allah is Most Forgiving and Merciful.'

If it is possible to disobey God's law as long as one is not wilfully inclined to sin, then it follows that it is also possible to obey God's law outwardly but still to commit sin. Let us look now at Surah Al-A'raf, 7:20 -27:

(20) 'And O Adam, dwell thou and thy wife in the Garden and eat therefrom wherever you will, but approach not this tree lest you be among the wrongdoers.' (21) But Satan whispered evil suggestions to them so that he might make known to them what was hidden from them of their shame, and said, 'Your Lord has only forbidden you this tree, lest you should become angels or such beings as live for ever.' (22) And He swore to them, saying 'Surely I am a sincere counsellor unto you.'

Verse 21 makes it clear that Adam and Eve knowingly disobeyed or rebelled against God. Adam's supposed forgetfulness mentioned as reason for his disobedience in Surah 20, Taha, verse 116 is hard to reconcile with Satan's reminder of God's command. Moreover, if they had only forgotten what God said, then surely we would not read in the next verse that Satan deceived them:

(23) So he caused them to fall into disobedience by deceit. And when they tasted of the tree, their shame became manifest to them and they began to stick the leaves of the Garden together over themselves. And their Lord called them, saying, 'Did I not forbid you that tree and tell you: verily Satan is to you an open foe?' (24) They said, 'Our Lord, we have wronged ourselves; and if Thou forgive us not and have not mercy on us, we shall surely be of the lost.' (25) He said, 'Go forth, some of you being enemies of others. And for you there is and

abode on the earth and a provision for a time.' (26) He said, 'Therein shall you live and therein shall you die, and there from shall you be brought forth.'

The fact that God said 'Go forth' echoes the biblical account of separation from God because of sin. (Gen 3:3, 23-24) In Surah Taha, 20:122 we read that his life became miserable as a result.

If Adam's sin was caused by mere forgetfulness then these severe punishments would in no way fit the light 'crime'. A deeper study reveals that the reason for the severity of it lay in the fact that in both, the Biblical and Quranic accounts Adam rejected the type of creature-hood God had assigned to him. He rebelled against His maker who is absolutely Holy and cannot tolerate this.

Muslims have to go to hell

It is agreed amongst orthodox Muslims that all unbelievers, without exception, will be consigned to the fire for ever, and that they will never be free from torment. All Muslims, except those who die in war for the cause of Allah, will have to spend time in hell in order to receive the punishment for their sins. However, once disciplined they will be released from misery, if Allah wills. The belief that punishment for Muslims in hell is only temporary for remedial purposes may be possible in individual relationships. However, it is an impossible way of action when many people are involved or when the one who punishes is in some official position. In such he cannot be merciful if he wants to remain just. Let us think about the confusing implications it would have to look at punishment as a reformatory process only that intended to make the sufferer a better person.

If even the greatest sin were immediately succeeded by hearty repentance, there would be no mercy of God necessary in withholding punishment; it could simply not justly be inflicted where reformation had been already produced by other influences. There are also cases in which repentance is less likely to be awakened by inflicting pain through punishment than by conferring new joy and honour. In these cases the lightest penalty would be unjust, and justice would require that the life of the sinner should be made brighter and happier. By looking at these examples which applied the theory that rests the justice of punishment mainly on its reformatory power, it can easily be seen that it leads to all kinds of grotesque consequences. (For more details see, 'The Atonement', by Dale, London Congregational Union of England and Wales, 1894, pages 380-381)

The reformatory aspect (the belief that chastisement will make the sinner better) which is ascribed to God's punishment in hell is further questioned by statistics that show clearly how most ex-prisoners committed offenses again once they were released.

4. BIBLICAL VIEW OF SIN

The Torah, the Zabur and the Injil, which together form what we call the Bible, are in complete agreement on this subject. This is how it should be in the light of the above God-given framework.

Sin is dishonouring God. (Jer 3:3-5, 31:19) It is 'any lack of conformity unto or transgression of the law of God' (1 Joh 3:4 Ro 4:15) in the inward state and habit of the soul, as well as in the outward conduct of life, whether by omission or commission (Romans 6:12-13, 7:5-26). It is not only a violation of the law, but an offence, a rebellion against God (Genesis 20:6, 39:9, Psalm 51:4) who vindicates his law with penalties. The person that sins is conscious that his sin is vile and polluting. It justly deserves punishment, and calls down the righteous wrath of God. Hence sin carries with it guilt and shame.

The moral character of a man's actions is determined by the moral state of his heart. The disposition to sin, or the habit of the soul that leads to the sinful act, is itself also sin (Rom 6:12-17 Gal 5:17, Jam 1:14,15). The origin of sin is a mystery, and must for ever remain such to us. It is plain that for some reason God has permitted sin to enter this world, and that is all we know. His permitting it, however, in no way makes God the author of sin. Adam's sin Ge 3:1-6 consisted in his yielding to the assaults of temptation and eating the forbidden fruit. It involved, The sin of unbelief (virtually making God a liar) and the guilt of disobedience to a positive command. By this sin he became an apostate from God, a rebel against his Creator. He lost the favour of God and communion with him. Here the question needs to be asked: 'Is there any connection between Adam's sin and the sins of his descendants?' Yes, there is, but someone may ask, 'Is this just?'

Common sense tells us that God created us for himself, to do good, not to put ourselves at the centre of life and thereby destroying it. Yet human experience shows time and time again that the latter is exactly what happened. A brief look at the last century will underline what we all know to be true: In 1905 the Armenian genocide took place. About 2 million Christians were brutally murdered by Muslims belonging to the Othman empire. Nine years latter the First World War started. It was followed by the Second World War in 1939. Many millions died in unbelievable suffering.

The list of absolute horror seems to be never ending: Kigali, Beirut, Bosnia, Algeria, Palestine, Israel, etc.

The almost unbearable complexity of evil is intensified when we look at the socio-political atrocities: divorce, abortion, adultery, abuse, prostitution, corruption to name but a few. Even education is powerless to stem the flow of evil. Doctors, lawyers, politicians, artists, scientists use their skills for good as well as for destructive and immoral purposes. Furthermore, many of us know what is right and good yet we act irrationally and don't put our noble thoughts into practice. What an offence is wickedness to reason and much more so to God! But iniquity becomes even more bizarre. Think of worthy motives in outrageous actions, and ugly, selfish roots behind good actions.

To add to the confusion humans are also capable of great acts of heroism, of selfless, wonderful deeds, of devotion and service to the truth. Thankfully, evil is identified only by reference to the good which also exists though to a much lesser degree. If we were basically good at heart only with the potential to sin, as many would have has believe, then the world should be in a much better shape with peace being the norm and trouble and selfishness being the exception. However, our experiences as described above, tell of our innermost being basically inclined to evil yet still with the potential to do good. That is why we have to teach our children to do the good not the bad. The latter comes naturally to them. This profound duality of experience comes both from personal responsibility and social conditioning.

Children resemble their parents in terms of temperament, intellectual and other gifts and even in moral traits.

Human evil stirs up feelings of guilt, indignation or shame. This proves the fact that our wicked human behaviour is not natural in the sense that we were created as weak beings, like animals that just follow their often cruel instincts. What went wrong? Even the atheist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre reckoned: "Man is a being to whom something happened." (Sartre, 'Cahiers pour une morale', Paris 1983, p. 51)

Judaism and Christianity teach that our first parents, the heads of humanity, rebelled against God. As a punishment they got separated from his immediate presence and therefore from many of his blessings. Since then we, their children, have not inherited their sins but their proneness, their inclination to commit wrong. This is what theologians call 'original sin'. The phrase has to be understood as original sin flowing from the originating sin, propagating itself in each person's beginning and becoming the origin of actual sins. They start with dreadful thoughts and desires in our heart. Original sin is defined as 'universal sinfulness, consisting of attitudes, orientations, propensities, and tendencies which are contrary to God's law, incompatible with his holiness, and found in all people, in all areas of their lives.' (Blocher, 'Original Sin', Leicester, 1997, p.18)

Common sense tells us that because all human beings have sinned, all are separated from a holy God and deserve punishment. The wrath of God is upon us because of what our first parents have done and because of our own evil deeds. We decided to do them as a result of the corrupted and depraved nature we were born with. ('natura' comes from 'nasci', 'to be born'). We inherited that nature from our first parents, hence its name 'Erbsünde' in German, literally 'hereditary' sin.

Therefore, the sceptic objects and says, 'why should we suffer for the sins of our first parents? It is not fair that because of them our nature is now inclined to do evil rather than good.' To that opposition Henri Blocher, professor of Systematic Theology replies, that the role of Adam and of his sin is 'to make possible the imputation, the judicial treatment of human sins. His role thus brings about the condemnation of all, and its sequel, death. If persons are considered individually, they have no standing with God, no relationship to his judgement.

They are, as it were, floating in a vacuum. Sin cannot be imputed. But God sees them in Adam and through Adam, in the framework of the covenant of creation. Therefore he sees their sins as committed against the Genesis 2 command (Do not take from the fruit...), as grafted on to Adam's sin in Eden...How did the punishment, death, reach all persons on the basis of their actual sinning? It reached them in the same way that death entered Adam's person (by personal disobedience): since all were in Adam, the head, sin could be reckoned to them according to the terms of the Adamic covenant, as offshoots of his sin.' (Blocher, 'Original Sin', Leicester 1997, p. 77f)

More support for the doctrine, again from human experience

The Stanford and Yale experiments.

In 1971, Dr. Philip Zimbardo organized and conducted an experiment in the cellar of the psychology building at the Stanford University in the USA. After creating a simulated prison twenty-four Stanford students were randomly assigned to be either guards or prisoners.

Within a few days of the test, the students playing guards had become sadistic. They placed bags over the "prisoners'" heads and forced them to strip naked to subject them to humiliating sexual pranks. Students from one of America's most prestigious institution of higher education descended into barbarism at an alarming speed. Zimbardo was forced to end the experiment less than a week after it began. (For details see: <http://www.prisonexp.org/>)

These dramatic results at Stanford confirmed an earlier experiment at Yale University. There people's willingness to inflict pain on others was tested. They were told to push a switch that supposedly delivered an electric shock every time another subject answered a question incorrectly. With only the researcher's insistence for motivation, two-thirds of the participants were willing to bring about potentially lethal shocks to the victim—even though they could hear his screams. Although the set-up was fake, the willingness of one person to inflict suffering on another was all too real, just as at the Stanford research.

Headship

Human experience once again proves the doctrine of original sin to be right. Throughout history tribes, communities and nations have not just been conceived as individuals but also as organic wholes under representative 'heads.' Both, leaders and followers express and influence a common identity. In opposite to animals the human race is one in some spiritual way, as well as genetically. Mistakes of leader have not just made them suffer immensely but also their supporters. (E.g. Hitler in Germany, Hussain in Irak, Bush in USA) The acts of our first parents who were appointed by God as the leaders of the human race rightfully counted as those of the entire community.

Legal principle and practice demands that all members of the group should stand under the obligation to pay the legal debt. _The legal bond is added to the natural 'family' fellowship, the genetic commonality. (See Turetin, 1847:557, IX.9.11; Murray 1977:37f) Since God appointed Adam and Eve as leaders prior consent of the individuals represented for representation is not necessary. The blood relationship has indeed affected us deeply as is reflected in the so called 'honour killings' in the Muslim world. If adultery has taken place relatives often kill the culprit in order to restore the family honour.

Freedom of choice

We must also question the assumption that to commit an evil act is just a freedom of choice exercised by individuals rather than also a process initiated and influenced by the nature of a person. Similarly, the terms 'biological' and 'spiritual' are not mutually exclusive. It is a fact that our feelings influence our physical well being in a complex way. Fear, for example, influences our digestive system. While there is a distinction between bodily processes and personal freedom there is no separation. Both work together in harmony. This truth solves the problem of original sin as being of nature, something we can't help because it was inherited due to our first parents disobedience, and yet incurring guilt. Freedom of choice is not contrary to our human nature but part of it.

Personal history

Hereditary sin, the concept that we have inherited our first parents inclination to do evil, is reflected in the following parallels:

Moral and religious life is modelled largely by symbolic systems, language, traditions, art and literature. Choice is not an option for a long time. When we are old enough to go against such influences, to do so is humanly speaking almost impossible due to the strength of those pressures.

Psychology has established the fact that children's personalities are influenced by damaged images of mother and father. There seems to be mysterious bonds of a psycho-spiritual nature among people.

The science of genetics has established that thoughts can not be transferred to and encoded into the genetic system of human reproduction. But certain character traits are passed on without scientists being able to know how. The same is true for animal instincts. Children do not receive from their parents actual diseases such as calluses, gout and breast cancer but undoubtedly certain genetic impressions which make them more likely to get those diseases.

Lastly, the disputed field of the spirit world, if confirmed, supports the case of heredity in sinfulness. Experiences of Marabouts, Phirans and Pastors indicate that evil spirits under some conditions cannot just negatively influence individuals but also their children and relatives.

Ayatollah Khomeini said: 'You should pay attention and all of us should pay attention (to the fact) that man's calamity is his carnal desire, and this exists in everybody, and it is rooted in the nature of man.' (Islamic Government does not spend for its own grandeur, by Kayhan International, September 4, 1985, p.3)

The answer given so far to the question of 'what went wrong' makes us realize how completely helpless we all are. It makes us aware that we are not worse or better than others. From God's perspective we are all in the same sinking boat. Awareness of our powerlessness keeps us in the only rightful state before an Almighty God, that of humility and compassion.

How can a newborn baby be called a sinner by birth as described in Psa 51:5 and 58:3? Is that not contradicting passages such as Deu 1:39, Isa 7:15 and Rom 9:11 which describe little children as being innocent and without guilt? Here is what Dr. Norman Geisler, a renowned expert in the field of apologetics has to say in answer to this objection. 'The sense in which a person is sinful at birth (Psa 51: 5, NIV) is by way of inclination, not by way of moral action.

All persons are by nature children of wrath. (Eph 2:3) because they are born with a tendency to sin, but they are not born in sin in reality. The condemnation over the head of everyone who comes into Adam's race is judicial guilt, not personal guilt. We stand condemned before God because all sinned in Adam our representative (Rom 5:12). This situation can be summarized as follows. We are not born in sin actually, by action, in reality, personally. We are born in sin potentially, by inclination, in tendency, judicially.' ('When Critics Ask' Geisler, page 240)

The term 'original sin' is frequently and properly used to denote only the moral corruption of the whole nature inherited by all men from Adam. This inherited moral corruption consists in, the loss of original righteousness, that is our right standing with God, and the presence of a constant proneness to evil, which is the root and origin of all actual sin. It is called 'Sin' (Rom 6:12,14,17. 7:5-17), the 'flesh' (Gal 5:17,24), 'lust' (Jam 1:14,15), the 'body of sin' (Rom 6:6), 'ignorance,' 'blindness of heart,' 'alienation from the life of God' (Eph 4:18,19) It influences and depraves the whole man, and its tendency is still downward to deeper and deeper

corruption, there remaining no recuperative element in the soul. It is a total depravity, and, as mentioned already, it is also universally inherited by all the natural descendants of Adam (Rom 3:10-23. 5:12-21. 8:7)

The doctrine of original sin is proved biblically and anthropologically:

From the fact that all men sin and are depraved. (1Kin 8:46, Isa 53:6, Psa 130:3, Rom 3:19,22,23, Gal 3:22, Job 15:14-16, Ge 6:5.6)

From its early manifestation (Psa 58:3, Pro 22:15)

From the absolute and universal necessity, for supernatural renewal of the human nature by God (Joh 3:3 2 Cor 5:17)

From the universality of death (Rom 5:12-20)

The doctrine of original sin does not mean that human beings are incapable of doing anything good (Rom 2:14 and Act 10:31). However, it means that we are prone to commit wrong things inevitably, unavoidably, because it is our nature to do wrong. From the polluted spring of our hearts flow streams of contaminated behaviour. Original sin does not mean that we have an excuse for our own sinful actions and can say it is all Adam and Eve's fault. (See Surah Al-A'raf, 7:29) God has not designed us to act sinfully but he initially created us in the beginning as very good with the faculty of choice. Now we are not very good anymore but we can still choose to do good. Eze 18 and Jer 31 speak about temporal consequences in this life regarding our own good or bad choices.

The religion of Islam (6th century) like a heretic group called the Pelagians (5th century AD) deny the concept of original sin, and regard man as by nature morally and spiritually well. However, as mentioned before, the Quranic account speaks about Adam and Eve having had to leave the Garden of Eden as a punishment for their disobedience. Since mankind still is excluded from Eden and therefore sharing in Adam and Eve's punishment to a certain degree it logically follows that human beings also share to a certain degree in their disobedience.

More recently the argument has come up that the concept of original sin is contradicted by the science of genetics. While it is true that thoughts cannot be transferred to and encoded into the genetic system of human reproduction, it is equally true that certain character traits are passed on without scientists being able to know how. The same is true for animal instincts. Joseph is quoted as having said in Surah Yusuf, 12:54:

'And I do not hold my own self to be free from weakness; for, the soul is surely prone to enjoin evil, save that whereon my Lord has mercy. Surely, my Lord is Most Forgiving, Merciful.' He does not place the blame on Satan or circumstances but points to a problem at the core of human nature! In Surah Al-Nahl, 16:62 the universal effect of the problem is made plain:

'And if Allah were to punish men for their wrongdoing, He would not leave thereon a living creature, but he gives them respite till an appointed term...'

This truth is supported by at least two traditions:

Muslim recounts a story by Muhammad in which Moses says to Adam: 'because of your sin you caused mankind to come down to earth.' (Mishkat al-Masabih, trans and ed. James Robson (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1963), I, 23 (Bk. 1, Chap. 4, Sec.1) Al-Bukhari attributed to Muhammad the words, 'Satan touches every child when it is born, whereupon it starts crying loudly, except Mary and her son.' (Sahih al-Bukhari, VI, 54, Bk. 60, chap. 54, trad. 71) Muhammad's earliest biographer, Ibn Hisham, quoted the prophet saying:

'Two men in white raiment...opened up my belly, extracted a black drop from it and threw it away; then they washed my heart and my belly with snow until they had thoroughly cleaned them.' (Ibn Hisham, ed., The life of Muhammad: (Ibn) Isahq's Sirat Rasul Allah, trans. Al Guillaume, London: Oxford University Press, 1955, p.72)

To quote a more recent example, Ayatollah Khomeini said: 'You should pay attention and all of us should pay attention (to the fact) that man's calamity is his carnal desire, and this exists in everybody, and it is rooted in the nature of man.' (Islamic Government does not spend for its own grandeur, by Kayhan International, September 4, 1985, p.3)

What is the punishment for sin according to the Bible?

Only with deep reluctance can we speak of the terrible consequences of sin. As we have seen in the story of Adam and Eve, they are separation from God, the very source of life. If we die in our sins the unspeakable result will be eternal, consciously experienced punishment in hell. Out of the many verses (Isa 66:22-24, Dan 12:1-2) that confirm this horrible fate here is what Jesus said when speaking about the day of judgement at the end of times in Mat 25:41,46:

Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels...And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'

5. QURANIC VIEW OF SALVATION

The way of salvation according to Islam is mainly by striving hard to do good works according to the many laws described in the Quran. Through teaching, education, the passing on of knowledge, Muslims hope to improve their old nature which is inclined to do bad naturally into a nature that becomes inclined to do good. To use an example they try to change a bicycle into a space rocket. This of course is impossible since a bicycle naturally is made to ride on the ground and a space rocket is designed to fly into space.

6. BIBLICAL VIEW OF SALVATION

The solution found in the teaching of the Bible is not to improve the old nature but to get a new nature that is inclined to do good. There we read in Rom 7:22 - 8:18:

'For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God,

but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin. There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law--indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you. So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh-- for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all that are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ--if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.'

In the passage above the old sinful nature is called 'flesh' and the new nature is called 'Spirit of God', 'Spirit of Christ', 'Spirit of Life'. By the help of this Holy Spirit only can man live a life that pleases God! The question needs to be asked, 'How will God help us with the Holy Spirit?'

'But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. (Rom 5:8-10, see also Eph 2:4-5)

The love of Allah in the Quran is conditional on man's behaviour and is therefore inferior to the love of parents who love their children without any condition. They do however hate the way their sons and daughters often disobey them. Out of unconditional love for their rebellious children parents have to punish them. A difference is made between loving them as persons but disapproving of what they sometimes do. This is how the love of God is portrayed in the Bible, of course in a much more perfect way than parents could have.

Why is it necessary that Jesus had to die for our sins?

We shall start our search for an answer in the purpose of sacrifices that are a reoccurring theme in the Torah. The Quran too acknowledges that God commanded animal sacrifice in the time of Moses (Surah 2, Baqarah, verse 67). Its main meaning was that it made

atonement, it took away the sins of the people who offered it (Lev 17:11). In that way they became acceptable before God because the punishment for their sin was paid on their behalf symbolically by the animal that was sacrificed. The whole procedure was to point to a perfect sacrifice about to come in the future (Isa 53). The story, which is also found in the Quran where Abraham was commanded to kill his son, confirms this truth. We read in the Quran about God's miraculous, personal intervention by sparing Abraham from this terrible ordeal through 'ransoming his son with a great sacrifice'. (Surah 37, Saffat, 108)

Why is the sacrifice which Muslims, Jews and Christians believe to have been a ram (Gen 22:13) called 'great?' Its greatness can not just be found in the explanation that it serves as a symbol for an act of men's self purification or devotion. If that were the case, there would be no need for God to provide Himself with such a great sacrifice. For the same reason it is also unnecessary to call the sacrifice 'great' just because since then an animal is offered by Muslims to commemorate Abraham's faithfulness and devotion. Furthermore, Surah Al-Baqara, 2:197 goes into great details about how an animal sacrifice is to be offered during the Hajj. If the purpose is only to remember Abraham and to think about men's self purification and devotion there would be no need for explaining all those details.

The solution to the problem lies in the word 'ransom.' It means that a person, in this case Abraham's son, is set free in exchange for someone or something else. When compared with Abraham's son, the ram by itself is not very special, in that sense it is not great. Therefore, the real importance of it has to lie somewhere else. It points to a perfect sacrifice provided by God on behalf of man. A study of God's attributes will show us what the ultimate meaning of sacrifice is:

The Bible (Lev 11:45) and the Quran (Surah 59, Al Hashr, verse 23) tell us that God is holy. Holiness means He is separated from anything that is unclean, bad, and hypocritical, in other words from anything that is sin. God is purity and righteousness. Sin separates us from God, it brings as its wages death, spiritual and physical. Once a person is dead he can not do anything; he is completely helpless. That becomes clear by the fact that God will not judge according to our good or bad works alone (Rom 3:23-24, Surah 35, Fatir, verse 45). Another reason why sin has such terrible consequences, is because God is just (Deu 32:4, Surah 95, Al Tin, verse 8).

He loves us so much as who we are but he hates the sin we do (Joh 3:16) Therefore, in His mercy he chooses to forgive our sins. But if He would forgive our sins without punishment, then in His mercy He would become unjust! That is why God revealed Himself in Jesus and died on the cross for our sins. In Jesus God met the requirements of His justice and of His love! Jesus died on the cross on our behalf, for our sin. In Deu 21:23 anyone who hangs on a tree is described as being sinful and under God's curse. Gal 3:13 explains that Jesus, himself without sin, became a curse for us because he took our sin on himself. After paying the penalty for sin through His death, Jesus rose again. By believing in his sacrificial death on our behalf, God promises everyone forgiveness of sins and eternal life in heaven. Salvation by substitution is in accord with a virtually universal practice. People consider it commendable for someone to die in defence of the innocent. Soldiers are honoured for dying for their country. Parents are called compassionate when they die for their children.

Illustration

Jesus said: 'There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no-one gave him anything. When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him:

Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate. Meanwhile, the older son was in the field.

When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' 'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' (Luke 15:11-32)

In this mysterious but marvellous story the father stands for God, the elder brother for the Pharisees, the religious people in Jesus' day, and the younger son represents obvious sinners. From a middle eastern perspective into which it was spoken, some very strange things happened indeed. The male head of a family would not disgrace himself by the undignified action of running towards his rebellious son. Nor would he have disrupted his son's words before a full display of repentance. It is unthinkable for him to command such a luxurious outpouring of affection for a son who shamed him in full view of the community. The father's behaviour illustrates God's amazing patience and love for his ungrateful children. The robe, ring, shoes, and fatted calf which await the son's return all highlight the extent of his restoration. But it came at the expense of his father's honour. We learn four major lessons from the story:

Firstly, as the lost son always had the option of returning home, so also every sinner, however wicked, may confess and leave their sins and turn to God.

Secondly, as the father went to elaborate lengths to offer forgiveness to the son, so also God offers all people, however undeserving, lavish forgiveness if they are willing to accept it.

Thirdly, as the older brother should not have resented his brothers reinstatement, those who claim to be God's people should be glad that his grace is available for even the most undeserving.

Fourthly, and perhaps most importantly, the shame brought upon the family through the sinful son, was profoundly carried by his father. Why would he do such an outrageous thing? The Old Testament, known as the Torah by Muslims, tells an equally intriguing story of how God created Adam and Eve and later the Israelites to be his people. We learn how he loved them like a father loves his children. Time and time again, however, we read with great sadness how his chosen ones break his commandments, how they become guilty of lawlessness. Even more disturbing is the fact that their rebellion is only a fruit of a conscious rejection of the Almighty God. His own people spit in his face and bring shame upon him before the very nations they were supposed to be witnessing of his honour and glory. To make matters even worse, they were not ashamed of themselves:

'Therefore the showers have been withheld, and no spring rains have fallen. Yet you have the brazen look of a prostitute; you refuse to blush with shame. Have you not just called to me (God): 'My Father, my friend from my youth, will you always be angry? Will your wrath continue forever?' This is how you talk, but you do all the evil you can.' (Jer 3:3-5)

The people of old did as they pleased because they had lost a sense of shame. While their mechanical, outward ritual acts may still have been in place they were not concerned about God's honour at all. Repentance, the turning round from one's evil ways, was later expressed in terms of recognition of shame and disgrace. (Jer 31:19)

Likewise, our disloyalty to God, our resistance against his work among us is known and is exceedingly shameful. We too deserve to be punished ever so severely. Since God is pure, completely removed from all evil, man's sin has cut off, effectively killed, the relationship between the two. The warning given to Adam and Eve became a frightening reality:

And the LORD God commanded the man, 'You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.' (Gen 2:16-17)

'For the wages of sin is death,...'(Rom 6:23)

Only through death God's honour will be restored. Consequently God introduced an elaborate sacrificial system to the Israelites through Moses. Shame could be removed by getting forgiveness for sins, but only if an animal would die in their place.

'...without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.' (Heb 9:22)

This all important truth is also reflected in 'Qisas' the Islamic law of retaliation. (Surah 2, Al Baqarah, verses 178-179) It consists in doing to the person who has committed a crime the very same thing they have done. The life of someone who is wilfully killed demands the murderer's life in retaliation. However, the next of kin can accept a financial compensation instead. According to Surah 5, Al Maida, verse 45, retaliation for inflicted wounds is also necessary. A nose for a nose and so on. If a member of the body which is to be cut off in revenge is defective, a compensation will be accepted.

From God's perfect perspective animal and all other sacrifices are defective. They can not take away sins but were only serving as a cover and a shadow of Jesus, the Messiah, the perfect sacrifice to come (Heb 10:1-18). He took our shame upon himself through his death on the cross. Through the crucifixion Jesus, our perfect, sinless mediator, restored the honour of God in a most profound and just way.

'Moreover, the Father judges no-one, but has entrusted all judgement to the Son, that all may honour the Son just as they honour the Father. He who does not honour the Son does not honour the Father, who sent him. I (Jesus) tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.' (Joh 5:22-24)

'Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death - even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.' (Phil 2:5-11)

6. CONCLUSION

Among many things Islam and Christianity have in common is the belief that ultimately only God can save us from sin and hell.

'And those who believe and do good works will be admitted into gardens through which rivers flow, wherein they will abide by the command of their Lord.' (Surah Ibrahim, 14:24)

To an inquiry of 'Aisha whether even in Muhammad's case good actions would not establish the right of salvation, the Holy Prophet is reported to have replied that even his salvation depended on the grace of God (Bukhari, Kitab al-Tafsir)'

The Bible agrees with this view when it says in Eph 2:8-9:

'For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God- not the result of works, so that no one may boast.'

Both religions agree that to believe in God is much more important than doing good works when it comes to salvation, the deliverance from guilt and pollution. However, only Christianity gives a satisfactory answer to the question, 'How can a pure God allow sinners to go to heaven?' Only Jesus met the requirements of God's love and justice through his death on the cross. Only Jesus restored the honour of God by taking away our shame. God raised Jesus, the perfect mediator, from the dead confirming his authority, loyalty blessedness and blamelessness.

The Messiah Jesus Christ is the reason why God alone passed between the cut animals when he made a covenant with Abraham and his descendants who choose to believe and consequently are made right before God (Gen 15:6, Rom 4). The life of such a believer according to the Bible is invisible because it is,

"...hidden with Christ in God." (Colossians 3:3)

Since the institution of covenants is used by God to mediate between Himself and His people, Jesus, the only mediator (1 Timothy 2:5), is actually called 'the covenant' (Isaiah 42:6; 49:8). He is the second sinless Adam who succeeded where the first one and his ancestors failed and sinned. (1 Cor 15:21-22, 45-49, Rom 5:12-21) All those who repent and invite Jesus to be their leader by faith in what he has done, will benefit and be blessed as his followers. To show their gratitude they will aim to do good deeds, knowing that from God's perspective they '..are are like filthy rags' (Isaiah 64:4), in that even the best of good works are unable to save anybody.

Those who deny the death of Jesus on the cross refuse to accept God's generosity, his blessing. They dishonour the giver. Will you accept God's invitation through Jesus and come to him in prayer? Will you confess your sins to him and ask him for forgiveness? Your eternal life in heaven depends on it!

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