

Exploring Islam in the light of Scripture (3)

How Islam Differs from Christianity

What do Islam and Christianity have in common and where do they differ? When the Philippian jailer asked Paul and Silas, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved and your household" (Acts 16:30-31). A Muslim would totally disagree with the answer given to the jailer. Why? Although Islam may use the same vocabulary as Christians, its view of man, sin and salvation clashes with Scripture.

What is man?

What is man? The Koran teaches that man is a created being, fashioned from a clot of wet earth (Sura 23:12-14). Angels are commanded to fall down in prostration before him despite their inherent superiority - after all, they are created of light while man is created of mud. Man is god-formed. But he is not made in the image or likeness of our Creator God. He is created to serve and to obey god. Sura 51:56 says, "I have only created jinn and men, that they may serve Me." In other words, the Koran describes man's relationship with god as master and servant rather than Father and child.

Man has the unique ability to know what is right and what is wrong. He can choose to act freely in accordance with such knowledge. He, alone in the world, owns the faculty of choosing to conform or not to conform to God's will. He is free to be good or evil, to resemble mud or to resemble God. He holds his own destiny and that of the world in his hands. Dr. Bill Musk points to the stark difference between the Biblical and Islamic view of man. He comments, "The Biblical account revels in the wonder of humankind being made in the image of God, able to enjoy fellowship with its creator, while the Koranic account is more reticent about any kind of communion between an absolute creator and a shapely bit of dust."

The Fall in Islam

While the Koran acknowledges the historicity of Adam's fall, it does not teach the doctrine of original sin. The fall of Adam is viewed as an accident or mistake, not a deliberate choice by Adam to disobey the Creator. His fall didn't constitute a "fall" for the whole human race. In Muslim theology there is no concept of original sin and of its transgression from generation to generation. Man is naturally good. He is born without sin. According to the Koran, a human being's soul is "prone to evil" (Sura 12:53) but evil is not inherent in human nature. Adam repented of his disobedience and God forgave him (Sura 2:37). Each new baby comes into the world programmed with an inclination towards God, toward true religion. Each human being is, therefore, by God's intention, born to be a Muslim. Badru Katerrega goes so far as to say, "all people are born as true Muslims, innocent, pure, and free."

What is sin?

What then is sin? The worst thing is to believe in a god other than Allah or to believe in Allah but also to believe in other gods at the same time. The lists of sins includes insulting Muhammad, neglecting the Five Pillars of Islam, namely, to recite the creed, to pray, to fast, to give alms, to make the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in one's lifetime. A sin is also to break Islamic law, which includes prohibitions against drinking alcohol, engaging in immoral sexual behaviour, eating pork, charging interest for loans, gambling and other laws. Since there is no Biblical concept of sin, Muslims do not see the need for redemption.

A Biblical Perspective

Original sin is a distinctively Christian concept. Sin is universal. It affects the total being. It is not true that only drunkards, adulterers, thieves and other such characters have sinned. We all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. (Rom. 3:23) The root of evil is our rebellion against God. One can be a person of outstanding character and still a sinner. When God is not recognized as the centre, the source, and the goal of our existence, man is in a state of rebellion. He constantly stands in defiance of God's will. If he does not know the Redeemer, religion as such, even in its most noble form, can never be viewed as anything other than human rebellion against God.

Salvation by works

Muslims believe they don't need a Saviour. They already worship Allah. They also have their holy book - the Koran. But it's not good enough to say you are a Muslim. You have to do good works. Muhammad said in a hadith, "The contents of the heart are reflected in good works." Muslims argue, therefore, that everyone has an equal possibility for acquiring heaven as each person starts his or her life with a clean slate before god. The path to paradise is the law given in the "Divine communication." According to Islam, this divinely given law and divinely offered forgiveness is a sufficient remedy for any human being's disobedience. It has the means to lead man to final perfection. Each individual stands accountable for his or her obedience or disobedience. Islam requires people to earn their way into Paradise by works. Kenneth Grag emphasises the point that law has to take precedence even over theology in Islam: "Law, rather than theology, has the prior emphasis in Islam. Broadly, it is obedience to the will of God, rather than fellowship in the knowledge of God's nature, which is paramount. Revelation is for direction of life, rather than disclosure of mystery - Islam is essentially submission, rather than 'communion'." If a Muslim finds favour with Allah, it is the fruit of his own labour. The Koran says: "This Day (Day of Resurrection), none will be wronged in anything, nor will you be requited anything except that which you used to do (Sura 36:54). Musk notes, "At the final judgement, a person will be saved if his good deeds outweigh his evil deeds. Human beings, then, are not so much in need of someone to save them as of teachers and guides who will give them God's commandments and warn them of the consequences of non-submission."

For those Muslims who have been "taught" by keeping the law they can enter Paradise, there is no real sense of hope of absolute forgiveness. The way of the law requires punishment and retribution. A practising Muslim told me; "I can never be sure whether or not I will go to paradise regardless how much good I do. It still depends on Allah's will where I go." I believe Islam's lack of understanding of sin and salvation is all the more remarkable since, historically speaking, Islam is related to Judaism and Christianity.

Faith

What is the role of faith in Islam? The word predominantly used for "faith" in the Koran is descriptive of human action - men and women acting out their commitment. In other words, the Koran presents God as being concerned with something people do, with the persons who do it. Musk observes, "In focus is the requirement for a 'believer' to be a person of faith rather than just one who acquiesces to a set of religious propositions." For some Muslim theologians "faith" equates simply to obeying god's commandments. For others, faith is primarily expressed in terms of knowing god, by which is meant submitting to him, exalting and worshipping only him. Consequently, "submission" constitutes the essence of what Islam is about.

The Christian faith is more than intellectual consent to doctrines. It involves trust and a personal relationship with the Triune God. God is neither an abstract idea nor a projection of our imagination. We may say to God, "Abba, Father." Our anchor of hope is grounded in the death of Christ for our sins. We know that our Redeemer lives. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. This blessed assurance of salvation is independent of science, culture and circumstances. In Islam, a Muslim is god's servant, representing his Lord in the world. According to Scripture, a Christian is God's friend, saved by the Son's death on the cross on his behalf. He serves his Lord out of gratitude for "the sheer grace earned" for him by Christ (Lord's Day 7:21).

(To be continued)

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October, 2006