

# INTRODUCTION TO ISLAM B: BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

## ISLAM: THE SIX BELIEFS

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Orthodox Islam can be thought of a series of layers, with the Qur'an at the centre, built upon by the *hadith* and subsequent layers of tradition, and the writings of the classical commentators (*tafsir*). It is by viewing the Qur'an through this series of prisms that mainstream, orthodox Islam believe has been built up.

There are a number of different ways of categorising the core beliefs of Islam, the most common description being that of **five pillars**. But according to the classical texts, the core beliefs — or *iman* — actually number six items. Muslims are expected to testify to belief in:

- i. God (*Allah*)
- ii. Angels (*Mala'ikha*)
- iii. Books (*Kutubullah*)
- iv. Prophets (*Rasulullah*)
- v. The Last Day (*Yawmuddin*)
- vi. Predestination (*Al-Qadr*)
- vii. Sometimes a seventh belief, namely in life after death (*Akhirah*), is added — or it may be subsumed under item 5.

(This list can be found in numerous sources.<sup>1</sup>)

In this next section of the seminar, we will take a look at each of these six beliefs in more detail, in each case setting out mainstream Islamic belief, a comparison with Christianity, and then a brief theological critique.

### 2. THE SIX BELIEFS: OUTLINE, COMPARISON, CRITIQUE

#### 2.1 Belief in God (*Allah*)

The central belief of Islam is self-evidently, namely belief in God. God is the central figure of the Qur'an, the prime actor and agent in its pages. And for Islam, the most important assertion that must be made about God is that he is one — the name for this doctrine is *tawhid* (cf. Q. 112). The God of the Qur'an is almighty, all powerful, all merciful, the creator, revealer of law to his creatures, and controller of history. But he acts alone. The Qur'an time and time again asserts monotheism over and above the background polytheism of Arabia, engaging in lengthy and regular polemic against it. For Muslims, the most severe sin one can commit is that of *shirk*, namely associating things with Allah. It is this that Muslims believe Christians are guilty of with the doctrine of the Trinity, which is usually understood by the Muslim mind as representing a belief in three gods, not a one God in three persons. The Qur'an polemically attacks the Christianity doctrine of the trinity, the concept that God is one in his essence but three in his persons, Father, Son and Spirit:

Say not "Three" : desist: it will be better for you: for Allah is one Allah: Glory be to Him. (Q. 4:171)

The doctrine of *tawhid* is tremendously emphasised by Muslims for whom Allah is completely transcendent. He has no human traits — indeed, it is frowned upon to describe him in any human

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<sup>1</sup> Ghulam Sarwar, *Islam: Beliefs and Teachings*, 3d Ed., (London: The Muslim Educational Trust, 1984) 18.

terms since he is so completely *other*. For orthodox Islam, the transcendence of Allah means that he has never revealed himself only his will — which is restricted to Islamic law. Revelation certainly does not consist of self-revelation or relationship, indeed the very idea that human beings could have a relationship with God is a metaphysical impossibility from a Muslim perspective. Instead, orthodox Islam is clear that the basic relationship between Allah and human beings is that of Lord (*rabb*) and slave (*abd*). That said, one must at least note the Sufis here who have seemingly moved away from this mainstream Muslim direction. Ibn Arabi said:

The whole cosmos is the locus of manifestation for the divine names ... in reality there is nothing in existence but His names ... All are he.<sup>2</sup>

Unlike in the classical works of Christian scholarship, there is little Muslim scholarship on the subject of the nature of God, his essence and his character.<sup>3</sup> Because Allah has not revealed himself, how could we know? However, what Muslim scholars were able to do in the first few centuries of the Islamic era was compile lists of the many epithets that the Qur'an deploys for Allah. Eventually 99 was settled upon as being the total number of these epithets or names and lists of "the 99 names of Allah" can be found both in works of Islamic scholarship and popular piety.<sup>4</sup> They are the Muslim to the question "who is God"?

### Comparison and critique

When we examine the Muslim concept of God and compare it to the Christian concept of God one can immediately see that there are similarities and differences. Beginning with the similarities, Christians can with Muslims affirm that there is one God, the creator, the almighty, the all-knowing. We can affirm many of the 99 names of God and say yes, we agree that this is an attribute of God. But the similarities should not distract us from also highlighting the differences.

Arguably the biggest difference between these two concepts of God lies in what is placed at the centre. For Muslims, two things are located at the centre of their concept of God. Firstly, the stress that is placed on Allah's oneness and, secondly, the emphasis on his power. The Qur'an repeatedly affirms that:

When Allah determines a matter, He only says to it, "Be", and it is. (Q.19:35)

Conversely, the two central tenets of the concept of God in Christianity are, arguably, self-revelation and grace. To begin with the first, the God of the Bible is consistently presented as the God of incarnation. From the theophanies in the garden of Eden, with Abraham and Moses, to Yahweh's manifestation as the Angel of the Lord, for example before Joshua, to his appearance as divine Wisdom throughout the pages of the Old Testament, through to the supreme example of incarnation in the person of Jesus Christ, the God of the Bible is, unlike the Allah of Islam, very concerned to reveal not just his will but *himself* and his *character*. And his character is one that supremely acts towards his people in grace and mercy: Creation was an act of grace, so was God's covenant with Abraham, Moses and David and grace was supremely demonstrated in the incarnation of Jesus.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibn Arabi cited in William C. Chittick, *Sufism: A Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000) 76.

<sup>3</sup> So George H. Bradwell, *Islam: It's Prophet, Peoples, Politics and Power*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 47.

<sup>4</sup> See for example the list in Arthur Jeffery, ed., *Islam: Muhammad and His Religion*, (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1958), 93-98.

The problem is that these attributes clash. Allah is utterly transcendent and removed from his creation; Yahweh regularly manifests his presence within his creation and, in the new covenant, dwells within his people through the agency of his Holy Spirit. Allah's primary concern is to act with power and to display his might. Yahweh regularly and consistently is prepared to lay aside his power to act with grace and mercy. Incarnation itself requires God's willingness to do so.

This leads us to a fundamental missiological question: do Christians and Muslims worship the same God? In the popular press this is commonly believed. You often hear reference to 'the god of Jews, Christians and Muslims'. The reasoning seems to go like this:

- Jews and Christians and Muslims say they believe in one god
- Therefore this must be the same god

The logic, however, is not particularly sound. If I say that I believe that Donald Duck is President of the USA and my friend says she believes it is George W Bush, then clearly we both believe in just one president. But we disagree over who that president is. And I think this is a helpful analogy when it comes to Islam and Christianity. Even some Christians have tried to suggest that just as Paul was able to identify the Unknown God of the Athenians with the God of the Bible, so we can identify Allah with Yahweh and proceed to try to correct the Muslim conception of God. Yet I would argue that the concepts of God are *so different* in Islam and Christianity that it is highly questionable whether they can be so easily brought together like this.

Rather than simply assume that because both Islam and Christianity speak of 'one god' that god is the same, a better way to proceed would be to look at the character of the god in each case and see if they match. In the case of the god of the Bible, his identity includes the Lord Jesus Christ [OHP]— the New Testament is clear that Jesus belongs intrinsically to God's identity. Islam would reject this and therefore offers a very different conception of god. I would argue that, at best, Islam represents an attempt to reach out to the god of the Bible, but the god of the Qur'an is a fundamentally very different character altogether.

## 2.2 Belief in angels (*Mala'ikha*)

The second major tenet of Islamic belief is belief in angels and other spiritual creatures — jinns and devils. These three classes of spiritual beings inhabit the earthly realm along with us yet also have access to the other two realms of the qur'anic universe, hell and heaven. According to the Qur'an, disobedient angels and jinn will be punished in hell along with unbelievers.

From the Qur'an's perspective, angels have one major role and that is to act as the intermediaries between Allah and his creation. It is angels who communicate divine revelation to God's prophets, not God himself.<sup>5</sup> In a sense, this role of angels derives quite naturally from the Islamic concept of God — since Allah is utterly transcendent, it is metaphysically impossible that he should himself stoop down and reveal his message to his prophets, even Muhammad. Instead, Gabriel is repeatedly sent to Muhammad over his 23 year prophetic career. This does raise some interesting questions for Islamic monotheism, namely *to what extent is it functionally monotheistic?* Is Allah contingent upon angels in order to reveal his will to his creation whilst preserving his transcendence? Whereas Judaism and Christianity speak of God's Spirit as the means of revelation (e.g. the Old Testament formula "... the Spirit of the Lord came upon x ..."), thus keeping revelation within God himself, Islam shifts this role to angels. Once you add an eternal Qur'an, you have a functional trinity.

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<sup>5</sup> John L. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*, Rev. 3rd Ed., (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) 25.

Besides a revelatory role, the Qur'an alludes to other roles of angels and these were fleshed out both by the traditional stories found in the *hadith* and the later *tafsir* writers, who often elaborated in careful detail the different roles of the various angels.<sup>6</sup> Other than Gabriel, the other three angels commonly named in Islamic traditions are Michael, Israfil (the angel who summons to resurrection) and Izrail (the angel of death).<sup>7</sup> Muslims believe that each person has two angels assigned to them to record their good or bad deeds.

As well as angels, the Qur'an regularly speaks of other spiritual beings, most commonly *jinn*. These are mysterious creatures who sit somewhere in the created order between humans and angels. Unlike angels, which are made of light, the *jinn* were created from fire. They can assume visible form, can be either good or bad, and be saved or damned. Later Islamic tradition regularly speaks of Muslim *jinn* and non-Muslim *jinn* and indeed popular folk-stories are replete with their appearances.

The division between angels and *jinn* is not entirely watertight and this is best seen in the case of Satan himself, or *Iblis* as the Qur'an often terms him. The Qur'an seems to vacillate over the question of whether Iblis was a *jinn* or an angel — on the one hand he is described as the former (Q. 18:50) but on the other, he assembles with the angels when Adam was created (Q. 2:34; Q. 7:11; 15:29-31; 17:61; 20:116; 38:71-74). What is clear is that it is Iblis who is the leader of fallen angels and *jinn* after he rebelled and refused to bow down and prostrate himself before Adam after the first man had been created. This folktale, well-known in Judaism, occurs some seven times in the Qur'an — the most repeated of any qur'anic narrative.

### Comparison and critique

The Qur'an is as allusive about angels as it is about almost any other subject. However, on the subject of angels we would have to accept that the Bible is also pretty allusive. Sketchy details are given, mere hints — hints that the apocryphal literature, both between the testaments and post-New Testament were quick to fill out. Those popular writings tended to assign the angels who featured in them revelatory roles, often that of divine guide, showing the prophet or seer around heaven, for example.

The crucial difference between Islam and Christianity on this subject, however, is related to the respective positions that angels hold in each theological system. For Christianity, angels are very much on the periphery — they are certainly there as part of the celestial furniture, if you like, but their role is neither focussed upon or fleshed out in detail. Conversely, in the Islamic system, certainly in the *tafsir* writers, the angels are absolutely vital as they protect the transcendence of Allah. Arguably there would be no revelation in Islam were it not for the presence and function of angels.

### 2.3 Belief in books

The third core belief of Islam consists in the affirmation of belief in Allah's books, of which Muslims know specifically of four: the Torah, which was revealed to Moses, the Psalms (*zabur*), revealed to David, the Gospel (*Injil*) revealed to Jesus and, of course, the Qur'an itself, revealed to Muhammad by the auspices of the angel Gabriel over a period of 23 years. Muslims affirm belief in other books too, revealed to previous prophets, books which we now have nothing left of.

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<sup>6</sup> See e.g. the discussion by Zamakhshari cited in Helmut Gätje, *The Qur'ān and Its Exegesis*, (London: Routledge, 1976) 164-169.

<sup>7</sup> Bradwell, *Islam*, 48.

All the books of Allah are related because all are derived from the same heavenly archetype, the “Mother of the Book” (Q. 13:39; 43:4). Most Muslims believe that the former books became corrupted — although to what extent and how this happened is expressed differently by different Muslims — Muslim polemicists are quick to accuse Jews and Christians of deliberate and whole scale corruption of their scriptures and resist any suggestion that the Bible we have now, or even the Bible that existed in Muhammad’s day, equates to the *Torah* and *Injil* the Qur’an speaks of.

Because of this corruption of the previous books and the loss of their message, the Qur’an was revealed as Allah’s final revelation to mankind. Unlike the previous scriptures, it contains the very words of God himself, a copy of the heavenly tablet, and was sent down (Arabic *tanzil*) by the angel Gabriel to earth. This is based upon the following verses of the Qur’an:

*Nay, this is a Glorious Qur’an, (inscribed) in a Tablet Preserved! (Q. 85:21-22)*

*We have, without doubt, sent down the message, and we will assuredly guard it from corruption. (Q. 15:9)*

The equation of the Qur’an with the very words of Allah has led to it being highly exalted in Muslim circles and a variety of high and lofty things predicated of it. As the very words of Allah, mainstream Islam has always viewed the Qur’an as being *uncreated*, indeed some have suggested as Allah’s speech, it is a quality of Allah himself. To compare its position with the Bible is probably a category mistake — the nearest equivalent is actually Jesus himself, who for us is God’s word made not a book but a man. As the Muslim scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr puts it:

The Word of God in Islam is the Qur’an; in Christianity it is Christ ... The form of the Qur’an is the Arabic language which religiously speaking is as inseparable from the Qur’an as the body of Christ is from Christ Himself.

The Qur’an that we have today consists of 114 chapters or *suras*. Not arranged chronologically, or topically, the *suras* in the Qur’an are generally arranged in terms of length. [OHP] As a rough and ready rule, the longer *suras* are generally later (but come first) and the earlier are shorter but are put later. However, this is not always the case, and the time period and subject can change sometimes even from one verse to the next. Whilst conservative Muslims have attempted to defend the arrangement, the critical Muslim scholar Ali Dashti writes:

Unfortunately the Qur’an was badly edited and its contents are very obtusely arranged.

The Qur’an is written in poetic form and in classical Arabic, a language that stands in similar relationship to modern Arabic as does New Testament Greek to classical Greek (or, to use another analogy, Shakespearian English to modern English). For orthodox Islam, the style of the Qur’anic Arabic is divine in and of itself, grammatically and literarily perfect. This often comes as puzzle to Christians — since for us, the language of the Bible is merely a vehicle for the message. For Muslims, the style and language of the Qur’an is part and parcel of the whole and cannot be divorced from that message. A further factor reinforcing this belief is that much of the Qur’an is in the first person, appearing as the direct speech of God.

In the eyes of orthodox Islam, the Qur’an is related closely to Muhammad’s life. The dramatic change that took place in Muhammad’s life when he and his followers undertook the *hijra* to

Medina is understood as being reflected in the Qur'an, with those verses apparently spoken at Mecca reflecting a marked difference from those spoken at Medina.

It would be almost impossible to underestimate the importance of the Qur'an for practising Muslims, since it is seen as the fundamental basis for doctrine and practice. Furthermore, there is no realistic equivalent to the liberal-literalistic axis of scriptural interpretation that is represented in the Christian world. For all practising Muslims, the Qur'an is the literal word of Allah.

This attitude is represented in the fact that for orthodox Islam, the Qur'an is untranslatable, so bound up is text and language. For a long time, Muslim scholars considered that to even attempt to render the Qur'an in another language was not permissible. Indeed, most English translations are called something like 'The meaning of the Holy Qur'an' — in other words, not the Qur'an itself.

## Comparison and critique

There are a number of problems for the Christian with the Islamic belief in books. The first concerns the idea that God's revelation is purely textual, limited to *books*. This fascination with the book in Islam is very interesting, the word *al-kitab* occurring about 200 times in the Qur'an, for example. I would suggest two possible reasons: (i) a fascination with writing in a largely illiterate culture (I would happily affirm the Muslim idea that Muhammad was illiterate, as for me the Qur'an looks like an oral product); (ii) this fascination with the greater technology of writing was generated for the pre-Islamic Arabs by the presence, in their midst, of Jewish and Christian communities who probably had their own written scriptures, or if not spoke very highly of them. So revelation comes to be equated with writing. But for Christianity, since the God of the Bible is the self-revelatory God, revelation is not restricted to written scripture. The Bible speaks of a wide range of forms of revelation: natural revelation, theophany, revelation through history, through direct prophetic inspiration by the Spirit and, in the NT, by the charismatic gifts of the Spirit. To limit revelation to books alone is to over-emphasise one category and to miss much.

Secondly, there is the fundamental problem and question of the nature of the Qur'an — this is not only a question Christians must raise, but one that raises a huge problem for the doctrine of *tawhid*. How can Allah be an absolute, indivisible unity when, existing alongside him for all eternity, is another entity, namely the Qur'an? Even if you maximize the divine nature of the Qur'an, in order to try to subsume it *into* Allah, you are still left with the fact that one can draw divisions within him, and this is precisely what *tawhid* is supposed to deny.

## 2.4 Belief in prophets

The fourth major Islamic belief is belief in **prophets**. Prophethood is a major Qur'anic theme, with lists of the prophets before Muhammad regularly being referred to. Some pre-Islamic prophets are referred to in more detail, although usually their story is told in a highly summarised way and packaged in such a way as to make a specific Islamic point. Prophet stories in the Qur'an are highly formulaic and usually consist of:<sup>8</sup>

- Commission
- Prophet confronts his people
- Rejection
- God destroys them
- The prophet is saved

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<sup>8</sup> Andrew Rippin, *Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, (London: Routledge, 2001) 22.

According to Islamic orthodoxy, prophets were sent to every race and people, from the very first prophet, namely Adam, to the last prophet, that is Muhammad. Muslim tradition usually identifies the number of prophets as 124,000, although the Qur'an only actually mentions 24 in number, most of them biblical, but with a few apparently pre-Islamic Arab names in the mix as well.<sup>9</sup>

Muslim orthodoxy has also traditionally taught that all of the prophets were sinless — the name for this doctrine is *isma*. Although this doctrine is not taught in the Qur'an, early Muslim theologians were quick to apply it to Muhammad and then project it back by extension to the earlier prophets. How could the divine message be imparted through a soiled vessel, runs the argument? Of course this raises a whole set of questions, not least that it justifies all of Muhammad's actions, including his caravan raids, execution of poets who criticised him and so on.

Across that prophetic line, the Qur'an affirms that the message of the prophets has been identical and universal, always derived from the Mother of the Book. Bradwell summarises it helpfully:

The basic message is to acknowledge the oneness of God, to obey his laws, and to perform good works in the light of the life to come.<sup>10</sup>

However, similar to the Islamic view of the previous books, the orthodox Islamic view has always been that the message of the prophets before Muhammad was lost or corrupted. Thus the mission of Muhammad was required in order to finalise and correct the message that is now found in the Qur'an. This belief also has the function — the critic would argue the *purpose* — of elevating Muhammad at the expense of the previous prophets, despite the Qur'anic assertion that Allah makes no difference between any of the prophets (Q. 2:136; 3:84). This trend is also found in the Qur'anic tendency to *Islamize* the earlier prophets, portraying them as prophets in the same mould as Muhammad. This is particular the case with Jesus, the pre-Islamic prophet who occupies the most space in the Qur'an and who is mentioned 97 times. The Qur'anic portrayal of Jesus is carefully designed to make him a forerunner to Muhammad.<sup>11</sup> Jesus thus becomes a type of Muhammad: both are called *nabī*, *rasūl* and *'abd*; Jesus gets the *injīl*, Muhammad the Qur'an; both declare some previously forbidden things permissible (3:50/6:146); both perform *salāt* and *zakāt* (19:31); the disciples of Jesus are called Muslims (5:111). In short, the Qur'anic Jesus legitimates Muhammad's prophethood.<sup>12</sup>

This tendency to elevate Muhammad at the expense of other prophets, whilst nevertheless maintaining a lip-service to the equality of all prophets, continues in the Islamic traditions, such as the *hadith*, where it is reported that only Muhammad of all the prophets will be able to offer successful intercession on the Day of Judgement, and the popular Islamic folktales that grew up, where all kinds of miracles and wonders are attributed to Muhammad.

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<sup>9</sup> Salih (Q. 7:73-79; 11:61-68; 26:141-159), Hud and Shu'aib (Q. 7:85-93; 11:84-95; 29:36-37).

<sup>10</sup> Bradwell, *Islam*, 49.

<sup>11</sup> e.g. Neal Robinson, 'Jesus', EQ vol. 3, 17; G. C. Anawati, 'Isā', EI<sup>2</sup> vol. IV, 82; Kenneth Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim*, (London: Allen & Unwin, 1985) 26; William E. Phipps, *Muhammad and Jesus*, (London: SCM, 1996) 92.

<sup>12</sup> Neal Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity*, (London: Macmillan, 1991) 37.

## Contrast and critique

In turning to the subject of prophethood, we find here a subject in which Islamic and Christian theology are much arguably even removed than, for example, the concept of God — there being few points of contact other than the fact that God did choose various people in history to be his spokespersons. That the Qur'an mentions some of the same names as the Bible should not fool us into thinking this means a shared theological framework. I would argue there are six areas of major difference, areas where as Christians we would also want to critique Islam.

- Firstly, there is the way that Islam seeks to elevate Muhammad at the expense of the previous prophets, usually by the means of claiming their message has been corrupted. Whilst as Christians we believe in progressive revelation, the latter biblical writers do not reject the earlier writings, for example; rather what we see is a re-application and re-interpretation: hermeneutics not hegemony. It is also hard to see how this Islamic way of viewing the earlier prophets does not lead to the charge that God is incompetent: if he sent 124,000 prophets and only the message of 1 was preserved, this looks very dubious. Would you fly on the 124,000th flight of an airline whose previous 123,999 flights have crashed?
- Secondly, and related to this, is the way that Islam teaches that all of the prophets brought the same, universal message. Central to Christianity is an incarnational view of God; the God of the Bible works with and through human culture and as part of this, recognises that different people need a different message at different times. The Israelites, in slavery in Egypt, needed to hear a message of encouragement. The arrogant rich at the time of Amos needed a prophetic warning of judgement and a call to justice. The exiles living in Babylonia needed to hear Isaiah's message of the complete sovereignty of Yahweh. Islam on the other hand flattens history and culture with its view of prophethood. Furthermore, this view also fuels the hand of Islamic radicals who want to lock the world into a seventh century desert model — for a supposed universal message, the life and message of Muhammad fit seventh-century Arabia remarkably well.
- Thirdly, there is the highly problematic doctrine of *isma*, or prophetic sinlessness. Not only does this not square easily with those qur'anic verses where Muhammad seems to ask for forgiveness (Q. 47:19; 48:1-2)<sup>13</sup> but does fit easily with the Christian and Jewish recognition that God was willing to choose and work with fallible individuals — Moses never entered Canaan, David sinned with Bathsheba, Abraham did not trust God and lied about Sarah, etc. etc. And if God cannot work with fallible individuals, then what hope is there for any of us. Furthermore, *isma* turns into a kind of Procrustean bed, a set of blinkers through which history is read and anything that looks wrong is chopped off. Hence the attempts to whitewash the biography of Muhammad, a trend that started early with Ibn Hisham's (d. AD833) sanitised edition of Muhammad's first biographer, Ibn Ishaq (d. AD767)
- Fourthly, there are great problems with Muhammad's prophetic status, such that Jews and Christians could not in the seventh century and cannot in the twenty-first ever consider affirming him as a prophet. One of the clear things the Bible bears witness to is that the God of the Bible always called prophets from among the people of God — yes, he could occasionally speak through outsiders (e.g. Balaam), but the prophetic vocation was for God's people and God's people alone. Muhammad was neither a Christian or a Jew and knew only popular oral versions of biblical lore.

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<sup>13</sup> Note also the prayer of Muhammad which is reported in the *hadith*: 'So please forgive the sins which I have done in the past or I will do in the future, and also those (sins) which I did in secret or in public, and that which You know better than I' (*Sahih Bukhari* Volume 9, Book 93, Number 534).

- Indeed, when you look at the story of Muhammad in more detail, increasing problems occur. There is the fact that, according to several *hadith* reports, Muhammad worried that he was demon possessed at first — this does not seem to square easily with the prophetic call narratives of the Bible. Furthermore, the qur’anic accounts of Muhammad apparently receiving convenient “revelations” that allowed him to break laws that were binding for everybody else (e.g. Muhammad was allowed more than four wives (Q.33:50), ability to have sex with any wife he chose, not holding to a fair order (Q.33:51). No wonder the *hadith* report his favourite wife Aisha commenting, “It seems to me that your Lord hastens to satisfy your desire” (*Sahih Muslim* Book 8, Number 3453)). All don’t seem to square with the biblical model of prophetic vocation, which sees the prophet as having to embody in his lifestyle and character as well as his message the message of God.

## 2.5 Belief in the last day

The fifth belief that all Muslims are expected to affirm is a belief in the Last Day, the Day of Judgement, on which all creatures — humans, angels and *jinn*, will be called to account for their deeds, either good or bad. The reality of the Day of Judgement is one of the major themes of the Qur’an and the nearness and awesomeness of this Day are repeatedly stressed. As John Esposito puts it:

The specter of the Last Judgement, with its eternal reward and punishment, remains a constant reminder of the ultimate consequences of each life.<sup>14</sup>

For Muslims, the reality of the Day of Judgement is something that is constantly in focus. All will be judged for their deeds and there is no redemption, no atonement and, no intermediary, although, the *hadith* do assign an intercessory role to Muhammad.

The Prophet said, “On the Day of Resurrection the Believers will assemble and say, ‘Let us ask somebody to intercede for us with our Lord.’ So they will go to Adam and say, ‘You are the father of all the people, and Allah created you with His Own Hands, and ordered the angels to prostrate to you, and taught you the names of all things; so please intercede for us with your Lord, so that He may relieve us from this place of ours.’ Adam will say, ‘I am not fit for this (i.e. intercession for you).’ Then Adam will remember his sin and feel ashamed thereof. He will say, ‘Go to Noah, for he was the first Apostle, Allah sent to the inhabitants of the earth.’ They will go to him and Noah will say, ‘I am not fit for this undertaking.’ He will remember his appeal to his Lord to do what he had no knowledge of, then he will feel ashamed thereof and will say, ‘Go to the Khalil--r-Rahman (i.e. Abraham).’ They will go to him and he will say, ‘I am not fit for this undertaking. Go to Moses, the slave to whom Allah spoke (directly) and gave him the Torah .’ So they will go to him and he will say, ‘I am not fit for this undertaking.’ and he will mention (his) killing a person who was not a killer, and so he will feel ashamed thereof before his Lord, and he will say, ‘Go to Jesus, Allah’s Slave, His Apostle and Allah’s Word and a Spirit coming from Him. Jesus will say, ‘I am not fit for this undertaking, go to Muhammad the Slave of Allah whose past and future sins were forgiven by Allah.’ So they will

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<sup>14</sup> Esposito, *Islam*, 30.

come to me and I will proceed till I will ask my Lord's Permission and I will be given permission. When I see my Lord, I will fall down in Prostration and He will let me remain in that state as long as He wishes and then I will be addressed.' (Muhammad!) Raise your head. Ask, and your request will be granted; say, and your saying will be listened to; intercede, and your intercession will be accepted.

*Sahih Bukhari, Volume 6, Book 60, Number 3*

Whilst the Qur'an does not offer much in the way of detail about the Day of Judgement, or about the signs that precede it, this is a gap that the *hadith* were quick to fill. In the case of the signs that precede it, many *hadith* traditions go into detail and Jesus tends to be given quite a role in the eschatological signs of the end of history; this is probably because of the hints given in Q. 43:61. As the final Hour approaches, the Anti-Christ (al-Dajjal) will appear and lead armies against the Muslims.<sup>15</sup> Then Allah will send Jesus who will kill al-Dajjal with a spear,<sup>16</sup> break the cross, kill the pigs, abolish *jizya* and there will be peace and riches.<sup>17</sup> This descent of Jesus is one of ten signs that the Hour is imminent.<sup>18</sup>

One has to remember the layered nature of Islamic belief: the Qur'an makes an allusion, the *hadith* supply stories about it, the *tafsir* writers hammer out the orthodox limits of faith in the area, and storytelling at a popular level explores the wild outer-limits of this orthodoxy and sometimes even beyond it.

The purpose of the Day of Judgement is to make the final division of all created beings into the saved and the damned — and Islam, like orthodox Christianity, is exclusivist — it is Muslims who will be saved and who will enter Paradise whilst non-Muslims will be condemned to hell. The Qur'anic view of both heaven and hell is very physical. In the case of the latter, the Qur'an and especially the later traditions are replete with graphic descriptions of the pain and torture that will be experienced in hell. Whilst, conversely, the portrait painted of Paradise is also very physical — rivers of wine and water, shady fruit trees, and beautiful female companions. This latter aspect does raise the troubling question of what a Muslim woman has to look forward to beyond the grave — coupled with the many *hadith* traditions that say hell has many women in it than men does raise the ugly prospect of an eschatological misogynistic tendency in some of Islam's core texts.

## Comparison and critique

As with so many of these core Islamic beliefs, there are both areas of overlap as well as great differences when compared with Christianity. Starting with the similarities, with Islam, orthodox Christianity has always had a strong eschatological focus — and a recognition of the reality of the Day of Judgement and the fact that one's choices now have grave eschatological significance in the light of this have always been affirmed. Linked to that are the reality of heaven and hell in Christian theology — although in recent times, especially in the postmodern West, there has been a tendency to downplay hell and overemphasis heaven, their reality is, I would argue, clear from scripture — whatever position one takes in debates over, for example, annihilationism vs. eternal damnation.

There are, of course, also grave differences and in the light of these the similarities pale by comparison. The first difference is the biggest and, arguably, the others flow from it; namely that in all the descriptions of Paradise in Islam what is missing is the presence of God. At the very best, a

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<sup>15</sup> e.g. *Sahih Muslim*, 41.7015.

<sup>16</sup> e.g. *Sahih Muslim*, 41.6924.

<sup>17</sup> e.g. *Sahih Bukhari*, 3.34.425; 4.55.657.

<sup>18</sup> *Sahih Muslim*, 41.6931-6934.

few late *hadith* suggest that Allah's back will be seen miles off in the distance. Yet this is entirely removed from the Christian teaching that, in the new earth, God will dwell *with* his people (Rev. 21:3; cf. 1 Cor 13:12). This is of fundamental significance and projects the total gulf that Islam has set up between God and his creation into the eschatological sphere.

Flowing from this absence are a number of corollary points, of which the most obvious from a Christian perspective is the absence of atonement and redemption in Islam. The Day of Judgement from an Islamic perspective is very simple: if your good deeds outweigh your bad deeds, if the balance of accounts is in your favour, you will enter Paradise. If not, you will enter Hell. Quite how the accounts are counted is the subject of much debate among the theologians, the emphasis usually being put on the sovereignty of Allah's will in deciding who comes into Paradise and who does not. But for those who are sinners, there is no hope. The reason for this is clear: the relationship between Allah and his creatures is that of master (*rabb*) and slave (*abd*) — and the slave's duty is to obey. Conversely, in Christianity the relationship is of father and son — witness the parable of the prodigal son — and there is indeed redemption and atonement for those who turn, even at the last moment, and truly repent and run into the arms of their heavenly father. Christianity views sin as a break of relationship, of covenant, between humans and God. But in Islam there is no relationship, nothing to break and therefore nothing to mend.

This raises a massive theological issue for Islam. If nothing is broken and nothing is fixed, if sin is simply due to a built in weakness in humans (a view that John Esposito seems to think is positive!) then why cannot we simply fall from Paradise again, just as Adam, Eve, Iblis, and the hordes of sinful angels and *jinn* did the first-time around? What prevents history repeating itself all over again on the Islamic view of things? Without a view of redemption and ultimate sanctification, the likeness of Christ being completed in us (Phil 1:6; Eph. 4:13), it is doubtful whether this question can be satisfactorily answered. If the Muslim paradise did exist, no Muslim could live secure in it.

## 2.6 Belief in predestination

The sixth major believe of mainstream, orthodox Islam is that in predestination. The Arabic term for this is *qadar* — power. For Muslims, Allah's omnipotence and omniscience are utterly supreme: he knows every event, past present or future — and not merely knows of it, but is in control of everything. The Qur'an places a tremendous emphasis on Allah's decree: all happenings in the world occur by his decree, according to his will and his wisdom.

When Allah determines a matter, He only says to it, "Be", and it is. (Q.19:35)

The sovereign will of Allah extends not merely to events but also to persons and especially to their ultimate destiny. If a person sins and goes astray, it is not so much because they have freely chosen to rebel, but, says the Qur'an, because Allah has so chosen to send them astray:

Whom Allah doth guide,- he is on the right path: whom He rejects from His guidance,- such are the persons who perish. Many are the jinns and men we have made for Hell: They have hearts wherewith they understand not, eyes wherewith they see not, and ears wherewith they hear not. They are like cattle,- nay more misguided: for they are heedless (of warning). (Q. 7:178-179)

Indeed, one of the 99 names of Allah is *The Irresistible*.

The doctrine of predestination has been a source of tension in Islamic history, however. Very early in Islamic history, a group known as the Qadariyya (taking their name from the word *qadar*, but in this case arguing that humans had *qadar*, power to choose) took up a strong free will position, not least as a reaction against the excesses of the Umayyad caliphs who propped up their rule by claiming that Allah had appointed them. Claim and counter-claim circulated and fierce battles were fought over the meanings of individual qur'anic passages. For example, Hasan al-Basri (d. 728) was very fond of taking all the passages used by the advocates of predestination and turning them on their head. Consider, for example Q. 14:27:

Allah confirms those who believe by a firm saying in the life of the world and in the Hereafter, and Allah sends wrongdoers astray. And Allah doeth what He will. (Q. 14:27)

Pro-predestination scholars argued this verse shows that it is Allah who guides to faith and sends astray. Hasan al-Basri in turn pointed out that those led astray here are *wrongdoers already* — and why were they wrong-doers? Because they had freely chosen to be.

This internal debate was eventually settled in favour of predestination, and this has remained a strong thread within Islam — witness the Muslim tendency to prefix everything with *inshallah*. Modern Muslims, especially those interacting with the West, have increasingly tried to play down this tendency and admit free will, without necessarily recognising that to do so means stepping back in time and ignoring one of the early and most major debates in early Islam.

### Contrast and critique

Whilst there has equally been a debate in Christian theology concerning the nature of God's sovereignty and its interface with human free will, a debate one might summarise as operating between two poles: Hypercalvinism and Extreme Arminianism, this debate has been long running and was not bloodily settled as it was in Islam. In fact, the existence of the debate bears witness to the much firmer place the Bible gives to human free will: in biblical theology, there are clearly two things that must be kept in tension, divine sovereignty and human free will. Any attempt to collapse one into the other is heretical; this is not the case with Islam. Furthermore, some Christian philosophers such as Alvin Plantinga and William Lane Craig argue that a philosophical construct such as Middle Knowledge can resolve many of the apparent tensions very well indeed.

But Islam, with its traditional insistence on a very hard form of theological determinism, generates a four major difficulties:<sup>19</sup>

- i. Firstly, the qur'anic insistence that Allah is the one who leads astray and the one who guides creates a number of apparent **contradictions**. What exactly is Allah's will towards human creation — is it one, or is it fractured and confused? Since Satan also leads astray according to the Qur'an (Q. 4:60; 17:175; 25:29), does this mean that Satan's purposes and Allah's overlap in places? If so, how can that be?
- ii. Any form of extreme determinism suffers from the **moral responsibility problem**. This states that you cannot legitimately blame Jones for murdering his lovely old Granny if all of his actions are fully decreed by Allah. That would be like blaming a tree for falling on the car and crushing somebody to death. This point works in the other direction, too. Just as one cannot blame Jones for bludgeoning Granny to death with a poker, you cannot legitimately

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<sup>19</sup> Discussed in greater length in Norman L. Geisler and Norman Saleeb, *Answering Islam: The Crescent in the Light of the Cross*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993) 141-145.

praise him if he dives into a freezing river to pull her to safety, catching hypothermia in the process. In other words: if determinism holds, nobody's actions are deserving of either praise or blame. This sets up a major problem for Islam, since the Day of Judgement is so central to Islamic theology — yet how can Allah judge if his creatures are not free moral agents but simply predetermined automatons?

- iii. The third problem with such a strongly deterministic view is that it **makes Allah the author of evil**. If human beings are not free moral agents but are simply acting out the decrees of Allah, then it would seem that any evil actions originate not with the human actors, but with the decree of Allah. The great Muslim theologian al-Ghazzali freely acknowledged this, stating that “Allah wills the unbelief of the unbeliever and the irreligion of the wicked ... all we do we do by his will”.<sup>20</sup>
- iv. Fourthly, Geisler raises an interesting observation that extreme determinism of this kind actually leads directly to **pantheism**. This is because according to Islamic theology, there is really only one agent in the universe, namely Allah. Anything that happens, happens because he decrees it. One might modify the Islamic creed to read “there is nobody who acts except God”. It is but a short step from this to the view of some of the Sufi writers who argued that Islam is about the annihilation of all traces of the human and the isolation of what is divine — once you posit Allah as the only actor in the universe, humans are reduced to mere extensions of his will and power — and once you make that step, the division between creator and created becomes eroded.

There is a relationship here, I would argue, between Islamic theology's inability to allow any form of relationship between God and his creatures. A relationship requires the ability to engage in free actions — at least to some degree — by both parties. Once you collapse the freedom of one party, in this case humans, it is impossible for their to be any relationship — hence the Islamic concept of the *master-slave* dynamic flows entirely from this form of determinism.

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<sup>20</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, 143.

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