

I. Epistemology and justification

When we are engaged in evangelism, dialogue, or debate with Muslims, we are dealing with the whole question of **truth claims**. Since Christian truth claims (e.g. Jesus died on the cross) contradict Muslim truth claims (e.g. Jesus did not die on the cross), and given the **law of non-contradiction** which states that

$\neg (P \wedge \neg P)$ (Both P and not P cannot both be true)
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Apologetics and polemics consists of trying to demonstrate that P is the case rather than not P. But these are second-order questions. What I want to look at instead are first order questions — how do we know what we know and what foundations do we build our beliefs upon. We will then ask the same questions of the Muslim mindset. What we are looking at briefly is what philosophers call **epistemology**: questions concerned with truth and knowledge.

A key concern of epistemology and one that has fascinated philosophers down the ages has been the question of **justification** — how can I demonstrate that I am justified in believing X to be true. Unless one wants to claim, with postmodernity, that all truth claims are wholly relative, then this is a question we need to address. How have Christians traditionally answered the justification question?

2. Christian apologetics and justification

Christian approaches to apologetics have generally taken an evidentialist approach to the question of truth. If one believes that X is true, then the way to demonstrate it is by marshalling evidence for it. For example, how can I know that it is true that Jesus existed? Answer, well I might call on the Gospels, references in Josephus and Tacitus, the rise of early Christianity, etc. etc. In short, X is shown to be true by appeal to Y and Z.

The problem with this kind of approach — and it is the mainstream approach, if not the only one, as we shall shortly, is that it tends to lead to two problems, either **circularity** or **infinite regress**. The former occurs when you argue something like this:

A is true because of B because of C because of D because of E because of B

An example of this can be seen, for example, in the typical Muslim claim:

- A The Qur'an is a miraculous book
How do you know?
- B Because it was revealed to Allah's prophet, Muhammad, from heaven
How you can be sure that Muhammad was a prophet
- C Because Allah demonstrated his prophethood by a miracle
What was that miracle?
- D The Qur'an
Why is the Qur'an a miracle?
(Repeat ad infinitum)

On the other hand, the problem of infinite regress occurs with this example:

B1 because of B2 because of B3 because of B4 ... because of B ∞ .

In short, you can always keep asking “why?” It was to solve precisely this kind of problem that a form of justification called **foundationalism** arose, famously traced to the seventeenth-century philosopher, René Descartes.¹ Foundationalism divides beliefs into two types, **ordinary beliefs** and **basic beliefs**. Basic beliefs are those that are self-evident or immediate, beliefs that we do not need to ask *why?* about. For Descartes, it was the fact that he found himself thinking. Thus he formulated his now famous:

Cogito ergo sum
“I think, therefore I am”

Most Christians operate with some form of this epistemological model and it has enjoyed something of a revival with the approach to apologetics championed by the likes of Cornelius van Til and Alvin Plantinga and others. Christened **reformed epistemology**, Plantinga argues that everybody has basic beliefs or assumptions that they take as a given (e.g. atheists will assume methodological naturalism as a given), therefore Christians are perfectly entitled to their own set of basics. Reformed epistemologists argue that belief in God is basic, and that a Christian worldview can be constructed on God as a foundation.

To ask whether the triune God of Scripture exists and whether the space-time world is what it is because of this God, is to presuppose that abstract possibility is back of God ... The God of Scripture is back of all possible eventuation in the space-time world.²

So Christian apologetics on either model consists of a foundation of **basic beliefs** that can arguably be taken as a given, and a set of second-order beliefs that can be built up upon that. From there, apologetics can proceed. What, then, of the Islamic mindset?

3. Christian apologetics and justification

The traditional Muslim approach to epistemology shares some features with the Christian approach, namely in that, broadly speaking, Muslims tend to work with some form of evidentialism or foundationalism in their apologetics. For example, witness the attempt to find modern scientific discoveries predicted in the Qur’an as a way to verify its divine origin.³

But there are also a number of important differences and it is these I want to focus on in the next few minutes. It is important to get a grasp of the Islamic mindset, otherwise Christians risk talking past Muslims when we engage in evangelism, debate or dialogue. We need to understand how they think in order to get a better handle on why they think and argue the way they do.

¹ For a good introduction to his thought, see Paul Strathern, *Descartes in 90 Minutes*, (London: Constable, 1996).

² Cornelius van Til cited in D. Z. Phillips, *Faith After Foundationalism*, (Routledge: 1988) 11. For Plantinga’s views on this, see Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, (London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

³ This approach was pioneered by Maurice Bucaille, *The Bible, the Qur’an and Science*, 6th Ed., (Paris: Seghers, 1986). It is increasingly popular and represents one of the major ways that Muslims attempt to persuade non-Muslims of the Qur’an’s status.

3.1 Little division between propositions and basic beliefs

The first major difference between Christian and Muslim epistemology is that Muslims place a far wider range of beliefs into the basic belief category. Now let me be clear for a moment: I am not suggesting that this is done *consciously*. The thing about epistemology is that it is not the kind of thing most people consciously analyse and think through. It functions subconsciously, unless one deliberately chooses to foreground it.

For Plantinga and Van Til, belief in God is properly basic — and everything else is built on that. Thus, for example, one does not need to disallow questions about the Bible, for example. They can be argued for and argued back to the foundations. Whereas for classical Christian foundationalism, again, one argues that X is true because of Y because of Z back to wherever the foundations are located.

Muslims tend not to do this with the majority of their doctrines. Thus, for example, the existence of Allah, his nature and attributes, the divine nature of the Qur'an, the prophethood of Muhammad — all are generally taken as basic or self-evident beliefs. It is for this reason that questioning has (a) probably never occurred to the great majority of Muslims and (b) when they come across Christians questioning them, they react very defensively or even aggressively. You are challenging the very heart of their epistemology.

An objection might be raised at this point about the popular 'proofs' offered especially in the West for many of the core doctrines of Islam, e.g. the Qur'an and science argument. Does this not show that Muslims are indeed trying to appeal *behind* their core beliefs to something more secure? I would answer no: these are arguments designed to convince non-Muslims, not to shore up Muslims in their faith. Because they perceive that Westerners operate in modernistic, scientific modes of thought (e.g. because the scientific method appears to them to be a basic belief of ours), Muslim apologists have adopted such methods. It says little about their own epistemology.

3.2 Islam as *a priori* true

What this inclusion of so much in their basic beliefs means is that for most Muslims, Islam is *a priori* true as an entire system. This is seen in a number of ways, perhaps the most obvious being the Muslim tendency to speak not of *converts* but of *reverts*. According to this way of thinking, everybody is born Muslim — this is just the way the world is. Many quickly fall away and of these, some will revert to Islam later. This way of thinking has its seeds in the way the Qur'an paints all of God's genuine people before Muhammad as being *Muslim*. So, for example, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, Jesus — all were Muslim according to the Qur'an. There can be no other way. Again this means that the Muslim mindset will filter out many questions and issues because Islam is, simply, true. It is not that Muslims are blinkered, or deliberately ignoring issues like the contradictions or difficulties in the Qur'an, rather they are simply non-issues, given the truth of the overall system.

3.3 Islam as self-evidently true

For the Muslim mindset, this leads irrecoverably to the next logical step. If the core tenets of Islam are basic beliefs, if Islam is itself *a priori* true, then it must be self-evident, because being self-evident is a quality of basic beliefs. Think of Descartes and his *cogito ergo sum* — whatever else one doubts, one is clearly thinking. Others would include logical or mathematical statements among their basic beliefs, so for example $2+2=4$. Again we see how this is self-evidentially true; how could one possibly doubt it?

And this is true too for the way that most Muslims see Islam. To give you an example. A friend of mine was talking at Speakers' Corner to a Muslim woman there. "Have you read the Qur'an?" the lady asked. "Yes," my friend replied. "So," exclaimed the woman, "you must believe that Muhammad is a prophet!" "No," replied my friend, "I do not". "But I thought you said you'd read the Qur'an?"

You see the way the thinking is going here: the Qur'an is so clear, its message so self-evidentially true, that all one has to do is to read it. No wonder that Muslims react with such force against those who have read the Qur'an and who wish to respond by asking critical questions.

3.4 The wilful ignorance of the disbeliever

This leads naturally to the next major component of Islamic epistemology: if Islam is self-evidentially true, then those who have looked into it and reject it must either be doing so wilfully, or Allah has predetermined their blindness, or Satan has misled them. There is simply no way that somebody could examine Islam in all fairness and decide for themselves that it is false. That could not be. If they could, then it throws the self-evident nature of Islam into dispute and the whole edifice comes tumbling down.

At this point we need to admit that some Christians, especially those of a hyper-Calvinist persuasion, have sometimes been guilty of a similar line of argument, arguing that those who reject Christianity must be blind or stubborn. Here we need to be very careful — it is one thing to say that non-Christians are stained by sin, another that they cannot think straight. It is perfectly possible for somebody to decide on intellectual grounds, for example, that Christianity is false; this may be for a variety of reasons. Furthermore, claiming somebody is blind like this is actually an excuse for laziness — rather than question whether we have presented the Gospel authentically for example, we point the finger outward at the other person.

3.5 Shame, honour and the Islamic mindset

There is one last component of the Islamic mindset that we need to address and that is the issue of shame and honour. Keith will tackle this in more detail in a moment. But for now it is worth pointing out that for many Muslims, defending Islam and standing up for what you believe are a matter of honour. To show weakness, doubt or to ask questions of your faith brings you and indeed Islam into shame. Therefore however strong the arguments of your opponent, you must not show any temptation to sway.

This is not the same as saying that pride has a factor in our thinking — Christians are as guilty of this as the next person. Rather it is a case of saying that emotion is strongly bound up with intellect and reason in the Muslim mind. To many Westerners who have, post-Kant, divided up the human condition into a series of watertight compartments (emotion, faith, reason, fact, value etc.) this seems odd; yet for the majority of the world, it makes fundamental sense: isn't reality and existence a unity?

4. How do we respond?

In the light of all this, let me suggest how we use this information when we are talking, dialoguing, or debating with Muslims. I want to suggest six things to consider:

- i. Try to continuously ask yourself the question, *why is this person arguing like this?* In other words, don't be satisfied with merely addressing the surface level of the conversation, but be aware of the underlying epistemology — both of the person you are speaking to, and you yourself.
- ii. Look for the hidden assumption and challenge it. Muslims are fond of arguing Y on the basis of X; e.g. questioning the triune personality of God based upon the teaching of the Qur'an, or assuming Muhammad's prophethood because of the Qur'an. Always try to work out how the person you are speaking to is reasoning and then deal with the root issue. For many Muslims this will indeed be either the Qur'an or Muhammad.
- iii. Be bold and challenge them on these core beliefs. Even if you feel you are getting nowhere, if you fail to do so, you are helping to reinforce those beliefs. The whole point about an assumption or a basic belief is that nobody does question it. Muslims need to realise that questions can indeed be asked — as the questions pile up, they may reach a point where they began, implicitly or explicitly to question the basicity of some of their beliefs.
- iv. Be prepared to defend what you believe. Because Muslims factor in shame and honour into their thinking, if you do not defend your beliefs when they are under attack, this will be taken as a sign that you do not take those beliefs seriously. Much damage has been done by Christians allowing Muslims to challenge them on a wide range of issues without a serious response. And you don't need to respond purely intellectually. Why not try: *how dare you insult my Scriptures by claiming they are corrupted! If I said that of the Qur'an, you would be deeply offended! I am deeply insulted! If you cannot prove, here and now in front of all these people these scurrilous claims that you make, then I demand that you apologise here and now! You would demand no less of me.*
- v. Help Muslims to see the interconnectedness of many of their beliefs. Because Muslims tend to try to ascribe basicity to so many of their beliefs, they tend to assume that each of them stands alone, self-evident. But this is demonstrable not the case. Consider for example the Qur'an. Ask a Muslim to explain a given passage of the Qur'an and you will usually find that they use the *hadith* or *sira* to explain it — this is because the Qur'an is largely meaningless without these other sources which are traditionally used to locate each verse in the setting of Muhammad's life. But this means that the Qur'an's meaning is, to a large degree, *contingent* upon the *hadith* and *sira*. Thus if Muslims wish to argue it is clear or miraculous, then they cannot do this without also claiming the same of the *hadith* and *sira* — with all their associated problems. Christians too often allow Muslims to frame the discussion in terms of Bible vs. Qur'an, whereas it should more accurately be framed as Bible vs. {Qur'an + *hadith* + *sira*}, which is a different thing altogether.

5. Conclusion

Because Christians and Muslims have different sets of basic beliefs, we will end up talking past each other unless we are very careful. We need to understand why our Muslim friends think the way they do, and then proceed to argue or discuss accordingly. Unless we ask epistemological questions, we will be much less effective. As the Apostle Paul put it:

To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some
(1 Cor. 9:22)

Basic beliefs are not beyond challenge or question — this is a charge that was levelled at reformed epistemology. Plantinga argues that a basic belief may clash with another basic belief — in which case one is forced to choose. It is worth noting that since Islam locates so many beliefs at the basic level, there is a high likelihood that, with help, Muslims may end up feeling some of these clash on their own — in other words that their system is inherently self-contradictory. (One such area is the doctrine of Allah's absolute unity (*tawhid*) and the claim that the Qur'an is divine and eternal).

Furthermore, one can also test basic beliefs by seeing how well they function in the world. Here, for example, the question of *jihad* and fundamentalism is a useful one to explore with Muslims of a more moderate persuasion. If the Qur'an is true, Muhammad the supreme example, and *Shariah* law perfect, then what of the consistent doctrine of *jihad fi-sabil allah* — many moderate Muslims I would suggest feel a revulsion in their hearts at this doctrine and tend to deny it is there. And the way to exploit this is not to simply try to prove Islam is violent and Christianity peaceful, a common but, I would suggest, fundamentally wrong-headed approach. Rather the approach is to show that their basic beliefs do not fit the world they believe at another level to be right — a world in which there is tolerance and respect for the other. The task is to force a clash between these two beliefs and create cracks in the foundations.

Bibliography

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