Common Ground between Islam and Christianity

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For many, Islam and Christianity have little in common. More than a few Christians misperceive Islam as a religion of the sword and of oppression, while many Muslims see Christianity as permissive and rampant with sin.

Yet, much of this misperception arises from the different emphases and vocabulary peculiar to each religion. In fact, most of their practices and beliefs are quite similar, as they should be, since they came from prophets of Allah (God). By reading key concepts in the Bible, the Qur'an, and hadiths (traditions of the Prophet), we can see their common points.

FAITH AND WORKS

To receive the favor of Allah, faith and works are crucial. The Prophet Muhammad stated that faith is required to enter Paradise (Muslim 1:96), and the Apostle Paul wrote that, "the righteous will live by faith" (Romans 1:17). In both religions faith goes hand in hand with good deeds and requires them to perfect it (Qur'an 2:177; James 2:22). Indeed, Jesus says that only those who do God's will can enter heaven (Matthew 7:21).

LOVE

Just as faith without works is dead (James 2:17), so, too, is it dead without love.

Love of one's neighbor

Muhammad affirmed: "You will not believe as long as you do not love one another" (Muslim 1: 96) and "No man is a true believer unless he wants for his brother that which he wants for himself" (Bukhari 1:12). Concurring, Jesus said that to love your neighbor as yourself was like loving God (Matthew 23:37-39).

Although the word "love" appears less frequently in the Qur'an than in the Bible, the notion of love permeates it. True love consists of right action towards one's neighbor, of taking care of others, of and helping those in need. In verse after verse, the Qur'an enjoins believers to be charitable to orphans, widows, travelers, and the poor. According to one hadith: "The best Islam is that you feed the hungry and spread peace among people you know and those you do not know." Similarly, Jesus tied Peter's loving him to taking care of his disciples (John 21:15-17), and John asserts that those who do not help a brother in need when they are able to do so do not have the love of God in them (1 John 3:17).

Love of God

Love of neighbors is a cornerstone of both Islam and Christianity, but love of God is the foundation. Such love is expressed in many ways, but let's look at four: prayer, repentance, contentment, and surrender to God.

People desire to be with and talk with those they love. Thus, Christians and Muslims who love God "pray continually" (1 Thessalonians 5:17) and "remember Allah much" (Qur'an 33:21).

Prayer is a cleansing activity, partially because engaging in it allows people to see God's greatness and their own unworthiness. Such understanding brings repentance, which is essential to receiving God's approval and forgiveness (Qur'an 20:82; Muslim 2:1142; Matthew 4:17; Mark 1:15; Luke 5:32; 15:7).

Through cycles of prayer, repentance, and forgiveness, the believers' love of God grows. This gradually results in a weakening of the desires for worldly things, the cause of discontent. Becoming content with what God has allotted them, they "give thanks in all circumstances" (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18), whether good or bad. Such believers are loved by people and by God, as one hadith says: "Desire not the world, and God will love you; and desire not what men have, and they will love you."

To be fully content means to be surrendered to Allah, a key concept in Islam. Indeed, the word "Islam" is understood to mean surrender, as it says in the Qur'an (3:19): "The religion before Allah is Islam." Christianity believes the same, for as Jesus said, the greatest commandment is to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matthew 22:37). In other words, give your entire being to God.

Those who completely devote themselves to God are, naturally, are the closest to Him. Yet God is near all believers. Christians believe that God, in the form of the Holy Spirit, lives within them (1 Corinthians 6:19). For Islam, the indwelling concept is not prevalent, but God is nearer to the believer than his jugular veins (Qur'an 50:16) and says: "When my servants ask you about me, tell them I am near, I hear the prayer of the one who calls upon Me" (Qur'an 2:186).

PARADISE

Both Christianity and Islam teach that those who love God, believe in God, and do good deeds will receive rewards (Matthew 5:5-11, 6:1-6 10:41-42, 16:27, 1 Corinthians 3:14, 9:17, Ephesians 6:8, Qur'an 2:62, 3:144,145,148). The best reward, of course, is eternal life in Paradise.

Who gets this reward? In both religions, the answer is quite controversial. There are those who say that only adherents to of their own religion-whether Christianity or Islam-go to Heaven. Many Christians confidently assert that only those who believe in Jesus will have eternal life (John 3:18, 11:25-26), and many Muslims affirm just as strongly affirm that only those who believe in Allah and accept Muhammad as His Messenger will enter Paradise.

In both religions, however, others disagree. Some Christians claim that it is necessary only that one has to believe in God and try to do good (Matthew 7:21, 10:42, 25:31-46). Likewise, some Muslims who agree with this view cite the Qur'an (2:62): "Believers, Jews, Sabaeans, or Christians-whoever believes in God and the Last Day and does what is right-shall have nothing to fear or to regret."

Adherents to both religions concur, though, that eternal life is a gift of God and based completely upon His mercy (Romans 9:15-16, Qur'an 3:74, 10:99-100; Bukhari 7:577). Nevertheless, God does not reject anyone who comes to Him: "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you" (James 4:8), and "He who loves to meet Allah, Allah also loves to meet him. . ." (Muslim 2:1120).

MISUNDERSTANDING

As the Bible and the Qur'an agree on many things, why then do Muslims and Christians perceive each other so differently and so often misunderstand each other? Such a question, of course, deserves an in-depth, multi-faceted answer; however, we will look at just one of those facets: a difference of emphasis and vocabulary.

Muslims tend to emphasize right action, while Christians tend to focus on right belief. Consequently, when Christians hear Muslims say that they are earning merit through their good deeds, they jump to the conclusion that Islam is a religion of works, not faith, and that Muslims are trying to earn their salvation, which no one can do. Also, Christians, disturbed by Muslims' emphasis on imitating the prophet Prophet Muhammad, perceive Muslims as legalistic and fixed on externals rather than on such transforming internals like as love. They not realize that for Muslims, good deeds earn merit only if one has faith, and that it is love of the Prophet that leads them to follow his example.

In turn, when Muslims hear Christians talking about freedom and love, they believe that Christians can sin as much as they want and still enter Paradise, a perception bolstered by the immorality of not only ordinary people but also of the highly visible religious and political leaders in the West. Muslims fail to understand that the love of God prevents pious Christians from sinning. And there are other similar vocabulary problems resulting in misunderstanding and misperception that are exacerbated by the natural belief that theirs is the true and final religion. This misguided attitude causes both Muslims and Christians to exaggerate any potential difference to its worst extreme, and to forget that their own religions have the same concepts, albeit sometimes de-emphasized or expressed differently.

MAIN DIFFERENCES

Not all differences are a matter of misperception; a few are even fundamental. The most important one concerns the nature of God. Both Christianity and Islam agree that God is the Creator of the universe, the source of truth, omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, eternal, full of compassion and mercy, but also the One who dispenses justice. Despite this agreement, however, Christians believe in a Trinity, three persons in one Godhead: the Father, the Son (Jesus), and the Holy Spirit. In contrast, Muslims (and Jews) assert that Jesus is not God, but and that God is one without any has no partners (Qur'an 37:4; Deuteronomy 6:4).

A second major difference is the concept of atonement. Christians believe that Jesus died as a sacrifice for everyone's sins (Hebrews 9:26; 1 Peter 1:2, 19; 1 John 2:2), which becomes effective for the individual upon his or her confession of belief to those who believe in Jesus (John 3:15-18; Romans 1:16). In Islam, though, sacrifices do not atone for sin but represent one's devotion to Allah. Consequently, no sacrificial intercessor is necessary or possible (Qur'an 2:256). Instead, God forgives those who sincerely repent and make right correct their previous wrongs.

CONCLUSION

Although the disagreement on the nature of God and on the atonement of Jesus seems unresolvable, most differences are more a matter of emphasis rather than of disagreement.

Christianity stresses right belief and faith, but no Christian would deny that they should do good deeds and have good behavior. On the contrary, they "work" hard to please God because of their faith. Muslims, on the other hand, assuming that faith is necessary, prefer to emphasize the practical side of perfecting their faith via good works. Christians and Muslims agree that faith

is necessary and that good works are important.

In reality, if one were simply to watch the outward behavior of pious Muslims and Christians in their daily lives, it would be quite difficult to know who was a Muslim and who was a Christian- for the pious of both religions who love their God and who have surrendered their lives to Him pray much, help the needy, and are kind towards their neighbors and their families. Due to its shortness, this article will necessarily make broad generalizations that have many exceptions.

All hadiths not given a source come from the book The Sayings of Muhammad by Allama Sir Abdullah Alal-Ma'mun Alal-Suhrawardy, who affirmed their authenticity (p. 18).

ISLAM AND CHRISTIANITY

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

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

        I will discuss these differences under four general headings:

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

        But how Christians and Muslims conceptualize God in their
respective theologies is actually quite different.   The emphasis
in the Islamic theology of God can be summarized by one word:
'tawhid', which means "absolute unity."   Muslims insist that
there is no distinction within the Godhead. God is sublimely one.
Thus the Islamic polemic against Christianity has centered on the
doctrine of Trinity.   This is the central doctrine that causes
problems for Muslims when they consider Christianity.   Muslims have

caricatured Christians as tritheists guilty of "shirk", that is,
attributing an associate to God. By believing in the Trinity,
Muslims say, Christians believe in three gods. This attitude is
expressed in the Qur'an:

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

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

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

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

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

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

Perhaps the best way to enable our Muslim friends to
understand why we believe that God must be a Trinity is to

emphasize Christianity's fundamental teaching regarding God, namely that GOD IS LOVE.   Now, love can 'never' be exercised in isolation. You cannot be all-loving and be alone. Love is manifested 'in relationship', and for that reason the God who is LOVE must exist within a "community within himself," that is, within a community of three Persons, among whom their mutual love is so perfect that they, though three, become perfectly One! This is the fundamental truth underlying the doctrine of the Trinity.

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

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

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

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

       In Christianity, revelation is mediated. We believe that the

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

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

     It should also be noted that Qur'an is much more a 'book-
centered' religion that Christianity. It is wrong to assume that
what the Qur'an is to the Muslim the New Testament is to the
Christian. Not so! The appropriate analogy is this: what the
Qur'an is to the Muslim, 'Christ himself' is to the Christian. We
are not 'book'-centered; we are 'Person'-centered (that is,
'Christ'-centered)! Muslims say that the Qur'an is the Eternal
Word of God; but we do not say that the New Testament is the
Eternal Word of God. Only "Christ" is the Eternal Word! Therefore
be sensitive to Muslims. Never insult the Qur'an; to insult the
Qur'an would be as offensive to a Muslim as insulting Christ would
be to a Christian!   By the way, Muslims, in affirming the
eternity of the Qur'an, face a theological problem that is directly
analogous to the one faced by Christians who affirm that Christ is
the Word, existing from all eternity. Muslims ask us how we
Christians can say that there is One God, who alone is eternal, and
yet claim that Christ existed from all eternity. They accuse us of
ascribing an associate to God in saying this. But they face the
same problem in teaching the eternity of the Qur'an. How can one
claim that something besides God -- namely the Qur'an -- exists
from all eternity without ascribing an associate (in this case an
object, rather than a person!) to God? It is interesting that both
Christians and Muslims solved these parallel theological dilemmas
in virtually the same way: Islam asserts that since the Qur'an is
the Word of God, it always coexisted with God -- "as part of God,"
so to speak, since God could never be without his Word. We use the
same reasoning in defending the Christian doctrine of the eternity

of Christ: as the Word of God, Christ always existed with God the
Father. Christ is co-eternal with the Father since God the Father
could never exist apart from his Word! One Eastern church Father,
Gregory of Nyssa, explained this mystery in this way: God
eternally spoke his Word (namely, his Son). And when he eternally
spoke the Word, there came forth eternally from his mouth the
Spirit (namely, the Holy Spirit, "ruh ul-quddus"), by which the
Word was spoken. (Breath, after all, is necessary for speech!)
Thus, from all eternity, the Word and the Spirit co-existed with
the Father! Islam claims the same thing about the Qur'an as the
Word of God! Do you see the similarity in reasoning?

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

      We must also mention here another standard Muslim argument
against Christians: that their scriptures suffered corruption and
distortion. This is called the doctrine of 'tahrif'.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

     Moreover, the charge of concealment (ikhfa') is levelled
against the People of the Book. They know the truth as they know
their own sons, "but some of them conceal it (2:146); they thereby
"swallow fire" and will receive a grievous penalty for their
duplicity (2:159; 2:174). "Why do ye clothe truth with falsehood,"
the People of the Book are asked, "and conceal the truth while ye
have knowledge?" (3:71) Muhammad is depicted as coming to reveal
to them much of what they used to hide in their Book (5:16). Jews
are further chided for dismembering the Torah by making it into
separate sheets "for show" while concealing much of its contents
(6:91). Of Christians, it is said that "they forgot a good part of
the message that was sent them" (5:15).
     It was a creative way of trying to explain the discrepancies
between the Qur'an and the earlier scriptures, but it is has
absolutely no basis in the manuscript tradition. Anyone who has
studied the manuscripts of the Jewish and Christian scriptures
knows that there is no evidence whatever for the corruption posited
by the doctrine of 'tahrif'. In fact the manuscript evidence, if
it establishes anything, establishes how carefully the texts of the
Old and New Testaments were passed down!

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

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

     To respond to such a question, we Christians must move beyond
a narrow Augustinian understanding of original sin, the view that
"in Adam's fall we sinned all." The Calvinists later carried this

view to an extreme, saying that the result of Adam's sin is total
human depravity; that is, that original sin has made human beings
completely incapable of doing anything good without the assistance
of divine grace! Such a notion is thoroughly incomprehensible to
Muslims!

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

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

Once one understands original sin in this way, I think the
need for salvation -- the ability to break loose from the
overwhelming bonds of sin that have grown stronger and stronger
through the ages -- becomes evident. With sin's effects
everywhere around us, we have an undeniable proclivity to sin; and
no one of us sitting in this room this evening is capable of
freeing himself or herself from sin's grip. Because Islam has
understandably reacted against the deficient understanding of
original sin I described earlier, it has tended not to be receptive
to this more realistic understanding of the pervasive effects of
sin on all human beings. Thus, it sees no need for salvation; it
cannot understand how Christ's death and resurrection brings
salvation. "Salvation from what?" they ask. Just as it is
unthinkable to Muslims that one person should have to shoulder the
guilt for another person's sin, it is unthinkable that another

person (in this case, Christ) would be able to pay the penalty for another person's sins.

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

But back to our main point: because Muslims do not recognize the universal and corruptive power of sin, unleashed as a result of original sin, they see no need for salvation in the Christian sense. If there is no sin that has a throttle-hold on you, you do not need to be saved from it. What you should do, according to the Islamic view, is to live a good life, pleasing God in all that you do. Submit to God and follow His directives. Religion, to the Muslim, does not mean salvation from sin; it means following the right path, or the shari'a, mapped out by Islamic law. While
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Christianity is a faith concerned primarily with "orthodoxy," or "right belief," Islam is a faith concerned primarily with "orthopraxy," or right practice. It is a religion of law, and it sees Christianity's rejection of the Law (as taught by St. Paul in his writings, especially Romans and Galatians) as a serious deficiency in the Christian way of life. This, of course, does not mean that Islam is not at all concerned with right doctrine or that Christianity is not at all concerned with right practice. It simply means that the emphasis is different in the two religions.

But that difference in emphasis is very important. If one recognizes the pervasive power of sin, salvation is not just an option; it is a necessity. Christians lament the fact that a faulty presentation of original sin led early Islam to "throw out the baby with the bath water" with regard to their understanding of sin. By reacting against an anemic understanding of original sin, as I have described it, they have missed what Christians consider to be the central truth of human existence: that no matter how hard one tries to conform to "right practice," he or she will fall short of the goal. We cannot live the kind of life that God wants by our own power.... And that is why salvation is necessary.

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

IV -- The Religious Community :
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Let me conclude on a theme that reverberates in the hearts of both Muslims and Christians: religious community. What the church

is to the Christians is what the " umma" is to Muslims.
Christians and Muslims both consider themselves as accountable to
a community of faith. It is not enough to believe in isolation; we
must link our lives to brothers and sisters in the faith.

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

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

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

by the overly informal, unregulated worship of the Evangelical
Christian. This, to me, is an interesting topic in Christian-
Muslim relations that needs to be explored more fully in
scholarship and inter-faith dialogue: Christians and Muslims need
to examine more fully -- and more objectively -- the similarities
and differences between their experiences of prayer and worship.

Islam and Muslims on Judaism and Jews

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by **Mustafa Abu Sway**

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JERUSALEM - Despite being in a protracted political conflict over the Holy Land that began around the advent of Zionism more than a century ago, Jews and Muslims have common historical roots, as well as theological commonalities.

Our common roots go beyond the Abrahamic tribal constructs. Abraham himself is considered in the Qur'an as the archetypal monotheist and a true submitter to the will of God, being "neither Jew, nor Christian" (Qur'an, 3:67). However, simple commonalities do not offer in and of themselves a way forward in interfaith dialogue. Abraham should not be turned into a comfort zone or a euphemism for avoiding issues of injustice amongst his third-millennial grandchildren.

The Prophet Moses and the Children of Israel form one of the major stories in the Qur'an. It is imperative that a Muslim believes in his prophecy and the revealed Torah, in as much as it is imperative to believe in Jesus Christ and the revealed Gospel (Injeel in Arabic). Yet, according to the Qur'an, the versions of the Torah and Gospel that exist today suffer from the vagaries of transmission and human editing, having been corrupted by scribes who altered the original text.

According to the Qur'an, Jews, Christians and Muslims share the history of revelation and have common prophets and revealed messages. Moreover, all pre-Islamic revelations had the same monotheistic message, with each prophet calling his people to only worship God without worshipping anyone or anything else along with Him. The law, however, while overlapping in certain areas, differed by design: "...To each of you we prescribed a law and a method" (Qur'an, 5:48).

Keeping the Sabbath is an example of a legal issue where there are differences amongst Jews and Muslims. The Qur'an says that the Sabbath was only required of Prophet Moses' followers, meaning that it is not required of Muslims. As for the Jews who violated the Sabbath, the condemnation of this group in the Qur'an can be read as a reflection of the sanctity of the Sabbath and as an example of contextualised criticism.

There were other actions that the Qur'an condemned such as creating and worshipping the golden calf. This historical event was considered intolerable by the prophets.

Islam softens the otherness of Jews and Christians qua "People of the Book", and entrenches their rights in the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet. Respecting the right

of the Jew and Christian to freedom of religion is an Islamic imperative (Qur'an, 2:256). The Qur'an made it lawful for Muslims to associate with Jews (also Christians), sharing a meal, doing business with them or even marrying their daughters.

Historically, Jews, like Moses Maimonides, contributed to Islamic civilisation as philosophers and scientists. They also served in public offices in the Islamic state. Salah El-Din Al-Ayyubi appointed a Jew to serve as a high ranking minister (vizier) in his government.

Long before this, the Prophet reached out to the Jews of Medina. One of the most important historical moments between Jews and Muslims came immediately after the migration of the Prophet from Mecca to Medina. In what became known as the constitution of Medina, the Sira books (i.e. biographies of the Prophet) state that the Prophet concluded a covenant with the Jewish tribes of the city and its surroundings, the first being the "Jewish tribe of Banu `Awf forming one Ummah with the Muslims".

Another historical moment occurred during the time of Umar Ibn Al-Khattab, the second caliph, who, according to the Cairo Jewish Geniza manuscripts, brought the Jews back to Jerusalem after the year 638 CE. This is very significant as it reflects a paradigm of Convivencia between Jews and Muslims as well as between Christians and Muslims in the heart of this holy city, in addition to Andalusia and other places.

It is not possible to fully represent 1,400 years of shared history, which includes beautiful and painful moments for both sides. Nevertheless, I would like to conclude by reflecting on the current conflict. Coming from a Palestinian Jerusalemite family and living under occupation since 1967, I comprehend the moral necessity of ending the Israeli occupation and doing justice to the Palestinians who have been wronged since 1948. However, the call for justice should never translate into creating or adopting Judeophobic narratives such as the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, nor should they result in acts of injustice towards Jews. This goes against Islam.

I recognise that Jews suffered in Europe and that they needed a safe haven. I am glad to say that there was never an inquisition in the Islamic world, as in a post-Islamic Andalusia (for which both Jews and Muslims suffered). Regardless of the stereotypes, I'm proud to say, there was never a kristallnacht in the Islamic world.

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