

The Concept of Relationship as a Key to the Comparative Understanding of Christianity and Islam

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Religion concerns the interaction of finite and infinite: the relationship of parties that are essentially other. Sometimes the otherness may be stressed, and sometimes the relationship. The balance between the two is, I would suggest, a determinant of a system.

Where the idea of otherness is submerged, there are two possible outcomes. We may find an infinite that is almost human, or that can be apprehended by human reason, as in the ancient Greek or modern liberal systems. Alternatively, we may find that humanity is absorbed into the infinite, as in Hinduism or Buddhism.

Where the idea of relationship is weak, we may find that the infinite recedes so far from man as to be inaccessible and unknowable. It is towards this end of the scale that orthodox Islam lies¹—although by no means at its extreme. The Christian faith, on the other hand, lies somewhere in the middle. It is clear that God and man are other, but it also offers close relationship between them. The ideas of otherness and relationship are not considered mutually exclusive; and in this I suppose it to be unique. It is therefore a helpful basis on which to build a comparative understanding of other religions.

In this paper we shall seek to compare Christianity and Islam. Beginning with the nature of God himself, we shall see that the notion of relationship runs through a number of major areas of Christian doctrine, and that a weakening of this notion will produce doctrines that come close to an Islamic understanding. We shall go on to see how these differing ideas of relationship make some key areas of the Christian faith unacceptable to Muslims. The discussion will include a number of statements that appear rather simplistic and in need of qualification. This is necessary for brevity, and for clarity in comparison of emphases in the two systems.

The nature of God

The Christian doctrine of the nature of God is that of the Trinity: three persons in one God from eternity. It is also that of a God with certain characteristics, notably holiness and love.

All this implies relationship. For what do we mean by a person? The great characteristic of a person is that he relates to others. He communicates, chooses, acts in relationship to other persons. To say that God is three persons is to imply that those persons relate. It is

¹ This paper deals with mainstream, Sunni Islam, although much of it is also relevant to other forms of Islam. An exception is Sufism, the esoteric, mystical branch of Islam. Sufis often use vocabulary that implies relationship ideas similar to those in Christianity, or even a pantheistic view. It is worth noting here that even such vocabulary must be interpreted within the Muslim understanding of the overwhelming transcendence of God. Thus the famous statement of Hallaj, 'I am God', implies, according to some interpreters, not the absorption of man into God but the negation of man in relationship to the one God who is all. See for example Rumi, Discourse 11.

relationship that unites persons, so at least one way of understanding the unity of the three is as a unity of relationship.

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What is holiness? It implies otherness, but it also implies morality. The Trinity is set apart from us by its moral purity. Yet I would ask how we can understand moral purity apart from relationship. Can one be good in a vacuum? I doubt it! Goodness is a quality, as is faithfulness, but we can only see it when it is applied in the context of some sort of relationship, just as we can only be aware of light when it enters our eyes. To say that a person is good without reference to anything but himself may be true, but his goodness can only be seen—and hence known—with reference to its results relative to others.

What about love? Love makes no sense without an object, for love has essentially to do with relationship. God is love from eternity not because he might potentially love, but because he does in fact love. There is love—and therefore relationship—between the persons of the Trinity.

So at the centre of the Christian idea of God we see the relationship of persons that are other. God is three—he is three persons that exist over against each other. But he is also one, for the three are united in a relationship of holiness and love.

If we remove the concept of relationship, what have we left? If we have the one, we cannot have the three. We can have the holiness, but not the love, and the moral dimension of holiness must be changed. This moves us towards the Islamic idea of God. There is no plurality in him: his essential characteristic is that of unity. He is not plural in himself, and he is to be associated with no other. He is not, therefore, in relationship in eternity, for there is no other with whom he might relate.

The characteristics of holiness and love are not absent from the Islamic concept of God. Both are predicated of him: but I would suggest that the words do not have the same content as they do in a Christian context. Thus God's holiness sets him apart, and makes him the judge, but it does not tie him down to morality. In fact, nothing can tie him down. He is free to will as he wishes, and powerful to carry out his will. He can therefore be tied down by no law, not even one that he has made.² In this sense, his moral character is secondary. It is subject to his will.

God's love may cause him to have mercy on his creatures, even to the extent of communicating with them; but it is a love that condescends in beneficence rather than a love that shares in relationship. God may love us if he so chooses, but his relationship with the objects of his love is very different from that envisaged in the Christian faith.

In Islam, God is certainly other than man. He is high and exalted, and powerful to do and will as he pleases. These are his fundamental characteristics, which can supercede both justice and

² Commenting on Surah 87, The Most High, v. 7: 'We shall teach you to read and you shall not forget save what Allah wills', Sayyid Qutb writes. 'Every time the Qur'an states a definite promise or a constant law, it follows it with a statement implying that the Divine will is free of all limitations and restrictions, even those based on a promise from Allah or a law of His. For His will is absolute beyond any promise or law.' (*In the shade of the Qur'an*, vol. 30, p. 140, MWH, London.)

love as the Christian would understand them. Both will and power are predicated of God himself, without necessary reference to anyone else, for God in eternity is not in relationship. The relationship characteristics of justice and love are secondary.

In Christianity, on the other hand, love and justice are primary. God is all-powerful, and can will as he pleases, but his character of faithfulness ensures that he does not act apart from his love and justice. His power and will are in that sense limited. He is in relationship from eternity, and the relationship characteristics come first.

The nature of man

The fundamental difference between the relating-in-eternity God of Christianity and the purely-one God of Islam is reflected in other areas of religious understanding. Most importantly it is reflected in understandings of the nature of man.

In the Christian scheme we see man as a creature over against God and other than him. Yet he is made 'in the image of God': there is a likeness between creature and creator. This likeness includes the quality of personhood: the essential characteristic of God that implies the ability to relate is present in man also.

This does not only mean that man can relate with his fellow men. The biblical picture indicates that the likeness between creature and creator is sufficient to make possible between them the mutual love, pain and communication of relationship. Man can relate with God himself. indeed, it is for this relationship that he is made. He is to relate with his maker in mutual love as a son relates with his father.

The Islamic picture is different. Man is, as in Christianity, a spiritual as well as a physical being.³ He is able, and responsible, to receive God's revelation and to act with reference to him. But the idea that he is made in the image of God is absent. Man cannot be said to be 'like God'—the very suggestion is considered blasphemous, since there is none like him.⁴ The absence of likeness immediately removes the dimension of mutuality in any relationship between man and God.

In particular, man cannot affect God, since this would detract from his power and self-sufficiency. As the Hadith says,

‘O my servants, you can neither do Me any harm nor can you do Me any good.’

Not the combined races of men and Jinn can in any way conspire to augment or reduce the power of God.⁵

The Christian would largely agree with this, but the Muslim would push the idea to the conclusion that man cannot affect God IN ANY WAY. He cannot cause him grief or joy. Thus, although God has deigned to communicate with his creatures, and even to love them,

³ See Surah 15, Al-Hijr, vv. 26ff.

⁴ See Surah 117, The Unity, but note again the divergence with Sufism where the tradition that 'God made Adam in his image' is often quoted, although not necessarily with the same content as in Christianity.

⁵ Sahih Muslim, Al-Birr (ch. 1115 in Abdul Hamid Siddiqi's translation, Kitab Bhavan, India, 1979).

the relationship cannot be mutual since man's response can make no difference to God. We read in the Qur'an:

'I created the jinn and humankind only that they might worship Me.
I seek no livelihood from them, nor do I ask that they should feed Me.
Lo! Allah! He it is that giveth livelihood, the Lord of unbreakable might.'⁶

The relationship becomes more like that between potentate and subject than that between father and son, since man is made primarily for worship rather than relationship. There is relationship between God and man, but it is not that of mutual love pictured in the Bible.⁷

Khurshid Ahmad describes 'realization of man's relation to Allah' in terms of the saying of Muhammed, 'You should worship Allah as if you are seeing him, for he sees you though you do not see him.' He tells us:

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It means that all action should be performed with Allah in your vision. If that is not possible you must realize that Allah is seeing you. This realization is regarded as the basis of true devotion. It signifies that man has identified his will with the Will of God and has brought it, at least as far as he is concerned, completely in tune with the Divine Will.... Man comes nearest to God by excelling in this process of identification of man's will with the Divine Wills.⁸

Closeness between man and God is described in terms of knowledge rather than likeness, and the ultimate in relationship is willing submission rather than interaction.

The nature of sin

The fundamental question concerning the nature of sin is not so much what constitutes sin as what sin does, for the latter determines the former.

In the Christian scheme, the dreadful thing about sin is that it breaks relationship between God and man. This has an effect on the sinner—it cuts him off from God's presence, makes him deaf to God's communication, and puts him under judgment. However, since the relationship is mutual, sin also affects God. It offends him and grieves him so that he longs to restore the sinner, although his character of holiness means that he will not overlook the sin.

In Islam, on the other hand, we have seen that God cannot be grieved or offended by anything that man does. Sin can only affect man and not God. In our relationship picture, since there was no mutual relationship in the first place there is no relationship to be broken. After sin, man is still the subject of the potentate as he was before. The difference is that sin makes him liable to punishment in the hereafter, and to all the consequences of not following the path

⁶ Surah 51, The Winnowing Winds, vv. 56-58, translation from M. M. Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an* (Mentor).

⁷ Again we note the expressions of mutual love between God and man in Sufism. It is of interest, however, that the picture of father and son is seldom used to illustrate this love. Even when the analogy is that of lover and beloved, God is usually the beloved who is sought rather than the lover who seeks.

⁸ In *Islam—its meaning and message* (Islamic Council of Europe, 1975), p. 24.

that God has declared to be best in the present. When he sins, man may injure himself and his people, but not God.⁹

This difference in the effects of sin is reflected in what constitutes sin in the two systems. In Islam, sin is essentially a violation of the law, of God-given instructions concerning religious duties and moral and social obligations. In Christianity, on the other hand, sin is often described in relationship terms: grieving the Holy Spirit, spurning the Son, being at enmity with the Heavenly Father. In Romans 6, for example, Paul speaks of men being in sin and under the dominion of sin: fundamentally, sin is a state of separation from God rather than a series of violations of his regulations.

Yet there is some overlap here: the Bible also describes sin as transgression of the law or wrongdoing.¹⁰ Does this imply that the biblical and Qur’anic understandings of sin are closer than I have suggested? I think not, for the biblical and Qur’anic understandings of law are widely separated.

The differences can again be understood in terms of relationship. In the biblical system even the Old Testament law is given in the context of relationship. It is significant that Abraham comes before Moses: the law is given to those who are already God’s covenant people. The regulations are given in the context of covenant relationship and are expressive of it. The New Testament has the same emphasis: it is as God’s chosen ones, those who are in relationship with him, that we are to act in accordance with his will. We are to be perfect because we are children of the Heavenly Father.¹¹ That is why disobedience spoils relationship: it defies the one with whom we ought to relate.

In Islam, the order is reversed. It is not that we become God’s people, and therefore act in a particular way, but that we act in a particular way and are therefore God’s people. The practices, the obedience to regulations, are of primary importance. It is by keeping these that the believer pleases God and draws near to him, and that he receives the best in this life and in the next. That is why violation of the commandments deprives him of the good that comes through acting according to what God has said.

Sin for the Christian, then, is anything that offends God and therefore breaks relationship with him, while sin for the Muslim is a wandering from God’s laws that results in judgment.

These fundamental differences in understanding of God, man and sin result in many mutual misunderstandings. In particular, Christian doctrines about salvation and about the Lord Jesus Christ may appear unnecessary, nonsensical and even blasphemous to the Muslim. It is to these doctrines that we now turn.

The doctrine of salvation

In his book *Salvation of the Soul and Islamic Devotions* (Kegan Paul International, 1983, pp. 28-29), Mohamed Abul Quasem recognizes that, in the Christian faith, ‘salvation is primarily deliverance from sin’. ‘Such deliverance’, he says of Christianity, ‘is possible here and now.

⁹ See the description of the sin of Adam, Surah 7, The Heights, v. 23.

¹⁰ E.g. Jas. 2:9-10; 1 Jn. 3:4; 5:17; etc.

¹¹ E.g. Mt. 5:48; Col. 3:12ff; etc.

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When it is made actual a new spiritual life is achieved through which the interrupted communion or fellowship with God is restored.¹² Such is not the case with Islam:

Islamic teaching is that sin stands between man and God no doubt, but he is not dead in it; so no new birth of the spirit is needed; he must, however, repent. Man is not by nature in a position from which he needs to be redeemed. He commits sin from which he must repent; his repentance is not salvation, but only a means to it; salvation is safety from punishment from sin in the life after death (p. 29).

Quasem is clear here on the differences between the Christian and Islamic ideas of salvation. The Christian seeks salvation from the state of sin itself, and the Muslim from punishment for sin. This, of course, reflects the ideas of sin discussed above. The Christian wants to be saved from the state of sin because that state is one of being cut off from relationship with God. The Muslim does not see the need for such a salvation, since he does not believe that he has fallen out of relationship. Indeed, he does not believe this relationship to be possible. He sees man as he is—fallen, out of relationship with God—and assumes that to be his natural state. He may therefore seek to approach closer to God, and to know more of him, but he will not seek the restoration of a relationship which he does not believe ever existed. Salvation for him, if we can rightly use the word in this context, can imply only an escape from judgment and an entry into paradise.

Since the nature of salvation in the two systems is different, the means of attaining it is also different. The Christian believes that God's primary holiness requires judgment on all sin, and that something must be done to remake the broken relationship, hence the need for the work of Jesus Christ. The Muslim, however, would reject both of these ideas. Firstly, since there is no broken relationship, nothing need be done to restore it. Secondly, since God's holiness is subject to his

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will, there is no necessity that sin should be judged. The Qur'anic idea of justice differs from that in the Bible:

The idea of transference of the punishment of sins or vicarious punishment is not accepted by the Qur'an. But it must be noticed that, according to the Qur'an, the punishment is not the necessary and unavoidable consequence of sin. If there is repentance then any sin, however grave it may be, can be forgiven by the mercy of God. God is not bound to punish. Contrary to Augustinian understanding of justice, Divine justice in the Qur'an means that God does not punish anyone without reason, or beyond that which is necessary. Justice also means that no good of man is left by God unrecognized and unrewarded. It does not mean that God is not allowed to leave any sin unpunished.¹²

God, then, is free to forgive, to show mercy, on whom he wills. Nothing has been broken by sin so nothing needs to be mended. Nothing needs to be done in expiation for sin: sacrifice is unnecessary.

¹² Muzammil Husain Siddiqui, 'The Doctrine of redemption: a critical study', in K. Abroad and Z. I. Ansari (eds.), *Islamic Perspectives* (Islamic Foundation, 1979), pp. 99-100.

What, then, is necessary for salvation—escape from judgment—in Islam? From God, the Muslim needs not an act of salvation but an act of revelation. He needs guidance as to what he should do, and mercy to help him to do it. The guidance is available in the Qur'an and in the Hadith—the words revealed to the Prophet Muhammed and the records of his life. The believer's response is to be twofold. He is to believe in God and in his messenger and message, and he is to act as the message directs. This will lead him both to the best in this life, and to paradise after death.

For the Muslim, therefore, the Christian means to salvation are quite simply unnecessary. God can forgive sin without sacrifice or mediator,¹³ and no restoration is required. At the same time Christianity is seen as lacking in what is really needed for salvation—the details of actions that will please God. The Bible, and particularly the New Testament, is singularly lacking in regulations about both religious and social duties, since it primarily records the history of relationship between God and man, and seeks to lead man back into that relationship. The Muslim seeks law that will lead him into salvation; biblical law makes sense only in the context of relationship—of salvation already achieved.

The doctrine of Jesus Christ

For the Muslim, there is simply no need for anyone to be sent from God in other than a prophetic capacity.¹⁴ Since guidance and warning are the ultimate needs of man, there can be no higher calling than that of bringing him the needed message. Since the biblical idea of the work of Christ is unnecessary within the Islamic framework, Christian doctrines about his person are also superfluous.

More than that, the Christian doctrine of Jesus is rooted in the idea of relationship between God and man. The essential work of Christ is to restore relationship, but there is more to it than that. The very idea that God can appear in human form implies a certain likeness, and therefore a possible relationship, between God and man. In Jesus, God himself comes among his creatures and relates with them. Not only does he speak to them, guide them and judge them: he also touches them, weeps with them, rejoices with them and eats with them. If there is no likeness between God and man, this cannot be. The very thought of it is blasphemy.

When we consider the nature of Jesus himself, we find a problem not unlike that of the Trinity: we have a plurality in unity. There, three persons in one God; here, two natures in one person. Again, a possible key is relationship. If God and man can relate, we can conceive of both being perfectly present in Christ. If not, if their essential otherness dominates, incarnation is nonsense, and the suggestion that a man might be God becomes unthinkable blasphemy. Even the notion of Jesus as Son of God does not help. For one not used to thinking in terms of relationship, this would imply a physical sonship—an idea as abhorrent to Christians as to Muslims.

¹³ There are traditions about the intercession of Mohammed as a means to entering paradise, and some look to 'Ali or to other saints as intercessors. However, there is still no idea of one person bearing another's sin.

¹⁴ The prophetic capacity here includes personal example, as is recorded in the case of Mohammed in the Hadith.

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Conclusion

It is therefore not surprising if Muslims vehemently deny biblical ideas about Jesus and the salvation that he brings. At best these ideas are considered unnecessary and nonsensical; at worst, blasphemous. We need to understand that such reactions may not be the results of ignorance of Christian doctrines, nor of hostility towards them, nor even of spiritual blindness. They are the expected consequences of belief in a system that is fundamentally different from Christianity in its understanding of God and of his creatures. If Muslims and Christians are to understand each other, these differences must be recognized.

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