

Sin and Forgiveness in Islam and Christianity

Preface

Keith prepared this entire talk to give on the evening of 3 June because the Islamic Student society had problems finding a speaker to share the platform. The day before the event, they were able to secure Mr. Sajat Aslam from Nottingham to present Islam's view of Sin and Forgiveness. Unfortunately, Keith was unable to obtain his remarks, but the outline of his presentation and the Sunni Orthodox view is presented in what Keith had already prepared. With apologies for Mr. Aslam's precise remarks not being presented, Keith offers his complete paper for your consideration.

I. Introduction

All of us know the personal hurt of being misunderstood. It is all the more tragic when misunderstandings and misconceptions are elevated to national and cultural levels extending the hurt to millions. In these days of increased travel and communication we have the opportunity of diminishing misconceptions that have plagued us, sometimes for centuries. We have the opportunity to talk to and listen to each other as never before. Let us not squander this opportunity. I hope my contribution today will be a small part of overcoming some of the many misconceptions that have arisen between Muslims and Christians.

To truly understand each other we must talk and listen with as much fairness and objectivity as we can muster. It is too easy to yield to prejudice when we are confronted with something difficult to understand or something contrary to what we expect or contrary to what we want to believe. Such prejudice does no one any good. It only reinforces inaccurate stereotypes and prolongs and deepens misconceptions. Modern science at its best strives to overcome ignorance and misunderstanding with impartial research. We would do well to adopt this attitude of impartiality toward the more difficult issues that science cannot address that are addressed by our faiths.

This is a short attempt to address some of the major misconceptions between Muslims and Christians about each other and each others' religions.

II. Islam's view of sin and forgiveness

In considering the Islamic view of sin and forgiveness, we must all realize that our view of this topic is dependent on what we regard to be revelation from God. Both Christians and Muslims realize that we need God's perspective on how to deal with sin. For Muslims, they believe God has revealed these things in the Qur'an.

A. Sin

The concept of sin in the Qur'an is presented using many different words and examples. Without going into all the technical terms, sin is presented as not living up to God's standard, "missing the mark" as it were, failing to do well enough. It is presented as making mistakes or unintentionally straying from the right path. It is also presented as being outright rebellion against God, so there is intentional sin, and unintentional sin. Some of the sins marked out for special condemnation are pride, immorality, hypocrisy, greed, ingratitude to God, slander, giving false witness against someone, lying, stealing, and injustice. Unbelief in God and his prophets, especially Muhammad, is also presented as sin. The greatest sin of all is to associate someone else with God, that is to put someone or something on the same level of God in your mind and heart. Overall, it is to prefer your own way to God's way, and stubbornly go your own way.

B. Why do people sin?

The fact of sin raises an important question, why do people sin? Why do people act against what they know is right and good? Islam's answer is twofold. First mankind has been created weak, and second, Satan tempts people to do what is wrong.

1. Mankind's weakness

Islam and the Qur'an are quick to point out that they do not believe that mankind is evil in its basic nature. The Islamic word for the basic nature in a person is "fitra." This is a person's basic nature as created by God. It is basically a neutral state, or perhaps with an inclination to the good, but can be adversely affected by outside factors. It is a state where the person has the capacity for belief or unbelief. Included in this is the concept of free will, that a person can choose evil or good, and has the power to carry out that choice in his actions and attitudes. One Muslim has defined it as, "a natural innate predisposition for good and for submission to God." (1) Another adds, "that man is born sinless, in a state of submission to God." (2)

Though the Qur'an presents that people are created with the ability to fulfill their duty to God and choose good over evil, it also recognizes that mankind consistently chooses what is evil. The Qur'an attributes this to an innate weakness. Surah 4:28 states: "**Allah would make the burden light for you, for man was created weak.**" (Pickthall's translation)

It is considered part of man's nature to commit errors in view of his being created with free-will and having finite attributes (3) His weakness and proneness to choose wrong though is viewed as something which can be overcome by a person's will power. One tradition presents Muhammad saying, "All of Aadam's descendants constantly err, but the best of those who constantly err are those who constantly repent." (4)

Another Muslim writer sums up the Qur'an's teaching on the subject of man's weakness by saying man's sin is due to his pettiness and narrowness of mind. He

puts it this way, "His self-destructive selfishness and the greed to which he is constant prey, his hasty, panicky behaviour, his lack of self-reliance, and the fears that perpetually haunt him arise ultimately from the smallness of his mind." (5)

2. Satan tempts

Satan also takes advantage of man's weakness and tempts him to do wrong. The Qur'an presents Satan as being real, and being very active, powerful, and effective in tempting people to go the wrong way. He whispers temptations into people's minds to turn them away from good deeds to evil ones. The Qur'an record's Satan's desire where it presents him saying in Surah 38: 83,84, "***He said: Then, by Thy might, I surely will beguile them every one, save Thy single-minded slaves among them.***" (Pickthall's translation)

Satan is believed to not have the power to actually overcome a person unless they first yield to him and follow his ways. Even then, the Qur'an and Islam present that man can overcome Satan through various means that are put at his disposal.

C. How do people obtain forgiveness?

Since people fail to obey God, how does Islam present that they may obtain forgiveness and become free of the evil around them? I put this question to a Muslim scholar and he summed up the heart of the Qur'an's teaching as being that, (a) the person must confess their sin directly to Allah sincerely, (b) they should then repent of that sin sincerely, intending to never do it again, and (c) they should then trust in the promises of Allah's forgiveness in the Qur'an.

To this basic process, the Qur'an also adds that repentance should be proved by doing good deeds. Surah 25:71 states, "***And whosoever repents and does righteous good deeds, then verily, he repents towards Allah with true repentance.***" (King Fahd translation)

D. Summary

The Qur'an presents mankind as being created with a nature that has the capacity to choose good or evil. Although the Qur'an graphically portrays the record of mankind's struggle as mainly one of failure, it is also quite optimistic that people can, with their own will power, through repentance, God's forgiveness, God's protection against Satan, and efforts to do what is right overcome evil in their lives and in society around them.

III. Christianity's view of sin and forgiveness

A. Sin

Most of what the Qur'an says about sin can also be said about the Bible's view of it. Sin is spoken of as being both intentional and unintentional. "Missing the mark" by failure to live up to a standard God has set is a basic view of it. Also, it is spoken of as deliberate transgression of the law of God and rebellion against God. Lawlessness, evil desires and unbelief in God are also all in view. Here is one list of sins that shows this:

"The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God." (Galatians 5:19-21 NIV)

Jesus Himself set the standard for behaviour in the Sermon on the Mount where he said:

"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matthew 5:48 NIV)

That is a high standard, and not one of us can say we have met it. As we did for the Qur'an, let us look at the Bible's answer for why people sin.

B. Why do people sin?

The Bible also presents a two-fold answer to this question. The first has to do with our nature's as people, and the second is the temptation of Satan.

1. Original Sin and Sin by Choice

The Bible teaches that man and woman were originally created perfect with free will. However, they chose to disobey God and when they did this it corrupted their nature. They were no longer innocent or good from their hearts. The Bible teaches in both the Old and the New Testaments that somehow, this inclination toward sin has been passed on to the human race. This is called "Original Sin" or "the sin nature" by Christians. The Bible teaches clearly that mankind, though still retaining an understanding of good and evil, has evil dwelling in our heart that prompts even our best actions to be at best a mixture of good and evil motives.

There are many verses in the Bible that teach this. Here are just three of them:

(1) God Himself saying in Genesis 8:21, ***"... every inclination of his (mankind's) heart is evil from childhood."***

(2) Jesus Christ said in Matthew 15:18,19, ***"... these make a man 'unclean'. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander."***

(3) The Apostle Paul in Romans 5:12:, ***"Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned."***

The Christian doctrine of original sin is a description of the tragic reality of mankind's tendency to sin. It is similar to the Islamic view but is more serious in that it rules out the ability for a person to overcome their sinful tendencies enough to live up to God's perfect standards.

The Bible presents this as mankind's true condition. And our own experience presents the reality that we all have problems with sinful tendencies that we are unable to solve. One Christian writer has noted that sin "... is more like a fatal disease, rather than simply weakness or a series of mistakes" (6)

While teaching this, the Bible also presents that we are responsible to God for the sins that we commit ourselves. In fact, this is the overwhelming emphasis of the Bible's teaching on sin. Somehow, even with the situation with our having a sinful nature we retain enough of a free will to be legitimately judged for our sinfulness. The Bible does not explain exactly how this is so but rather presents it as a fact without explanation.

One Christian writer has summed it up by saying: "We stand in a mysterious solidarity with Adam (Eve and Adam) in sin; we are also individually responsible. There is a sense in which we are determined; there is another sense in which we are absolutely free. But since we are both, neither the one nor the other is the final word. (7)

Another puts it this way, On the other hand...it does teach that there is a real root of sin in addition to individual sins, that this cannot be identified merely with the power of influence or general environment, that there is a broader and deeper nexus (bond, tie) of sin which none can escape, and that there is no true eradication of sin in this life even for believers. (8)

The Apostle Paul summed up the net effect of sin in people's lives by saying,

"For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23 NIV)

2. Satan tempts

The Bible also recognizes that Satan is alive and well on planet earth and is in the business of inciting people to wickedness. This is graphically presented in Ephesians 6:11,12 where it says:

"Put on the full armour of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but

against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."

The Christian is promised various spiritual means for dealing with the temptations of the devil in order to resist him and defeat him.

Seeing that the Bible presents it as a reality that people fail and sin, both from their own inability to live up to God's standards and because of the temptations of Satan,

C. How do people obtain forgiveness?

Christianity's answer is similar to the Muslim scholar's answer. People are to confess their sins to God sincerely; they are to repent of their sins sincerely; and they are to trust in God's promise of forgiveness from the Bible. The difference is in how God offers and ensures that promise of forgiveness.

From the earliest chapters of the Bible a doctrine is spelled out for how God takes away the guilt of mankind's sin. It is called atonement through blood sacrifice. Before Jesus was crucified the blood of sacrificed animals covered the sins of the people. Atonement for sin through blood sacrifice was at the heart of the Old Testament Law. It was at the heart of Israelite worship at the Tabernacle built by Moses and then the Temple built by Solomon. The Torah presents God Himself saying in Leviticus 17:11, "For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life."

In the Law of Moses animal sacrifice to cover sin was codified into a precise system. It was the heart of the covenant God had with the Israelites. One whole book of the Torah and significant parts of others are devoted to this theme. All of the Old Testament Prophets called Israel back to faithful worship at the Tabernacle or Temple using the precise system of animal sacrifices required in the Law of Moses.

Also, the Bible teaches that sin is so serious that a death must take place to atone for it. The prophet Ezekiel records God as saying, "***The person who sins will die.***" (Ezekiel 18:20)

The Apostle Paul echoed this when he said, "***The wages of sin is death.***" (Romans 6:23)

The Old Testament prophets also predicted a day when a perfect sacrifice would be offered which would fulfil the whole system and usher in a new covenant with God. This sacrifice was to be made by the Messiah Himself and it is what is recorded in the Gospels of the New Testament in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah.

The prophet Isaiah spoke about the Messiah's sacrifice for sin 700 years before Christ was born:

"We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors."
(Isaiah 53: 6,12 NIV)

Jesus confirmed this where He said,

"For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10:45 NIV)

A person becomes a Christian in the first place by trusting in Jesus Christ's death for him on the cross, and then after that every time he sins, he comes to God in humility and repentance and claims the forgiveness that is provided in the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ.

This gives the Christian tremendous gratitude and assurance of forgiveness before God because he knows that not only has he been pardoned for the sin, but that the sin has been completely atoned for. In fact, the Bible teaches that no other way of atoning for sin is sufficient. The nature of sin, our inability to overcome it, and the perfect moral nature of God make it so that there is no way in our own efforts we can atone for our sins. The Bible presents it that God, in his love for mankind and to uphold his justice, has provided this one way of atonement for sin. Jesus states this where He said,

"For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16 NIV)

IV. Similarities And Differences

From what has been presented so far, one can detect many areas of similarity and difference. Permit me to bring out the most significant ones.

A. Similarities

1. Sin

Both Islam and Christianity graphically present that sin is the root of the problems of the world today. They both present it as having a real and pervasive influence in every person's life. They both present the fact that sin and its effects are devastating to individuals, families, communities, and nations. They agree for the most part on the what actions and attitudes are sinful. They both present the situation that one of a person's main responsibilities before God is to learn to overcome sin by the means God provides.

2. Why we sin

Both faiths present mankind as having a problem with sin. Both present that mankind chooses to sin a lot. Both present mankind as showing a great amount of rebellion toward God. They also both present even believers as showing a great amount of rebellion toward God. They both present this rebellion as coming from man's heart, as well as temptation from Satan.

3. Forgiveness

Also, both faiths recognize that as individuals we need forgiveness from God in order to carry on with God's purposes for our lives, and for our personal and social well-being. Both recognize that sincere confession and repentance are necessary in order for forgiveness to be granted. Both faiths also recognize that it is God that grants forgiveness, that sins are committed first against Him and after that against people. He is the one to whom we are responsible for our behaviour and attitudes.

B. Differences

Though there are these tremendous similarities, there are also deep and significant differences.

1. Sin

Islam and Christianity disagree as to the exact nature of sin and the penalty it deserves. Christianity presents that even one sin merits death before God because of His uncompromising moral character and justice. Islam does not make it out to be this grim. Islam presents many sins as errors and weakness that do not warrant substantial penalties from God and therefore in His mercy are overlooked. This situation points to two different views of the character of God and the exercise of His attributes, of the way His mercy, justice, and love relate to each other.

2. Why do we sin?

Also, Islam and Christianity present two different views of our basic nature as human beings. Islam presents that we are created essentially neutral or with a leaning toward good, but that this can be influenced toward evil by bad choices and temptation. Islam looks at people as basically able by their own will power and choice to be able to avoid and overcome evil. The Qur'an, though, also presents people as being created weak and inadequate so that they inevitably choose to sin. It presents that this can be overcome by attention to one's thoughts and actions and attending to one's religious duties in Islam. Though weak, Islam still presents mankind as having a stronger willpower to resist sin than Christianity does.

Christianity presents that our problem is deeper than our will power or abilities can handle. The Bible teaches that our very nature is tainted with sin leaving us with an inability to live up to God's righteous standards. Also, the Bible presents that man does retain enough free will to make his choices to sin real and worthy of judgement. It teaches though that there is no way in ourselves we can overcome our sin and guilt so that we can merit God's favour. In and of ourselves, our thoughts and actions merit the wrath of God.

3. Forgiveness

The difference between Islam and Christianity on this is that Islam presents that man can obtain forgiveness for his sins by repentance and good works, while Christianity and the Bible teach that repentance and good works are not enough. The Bible teaches that the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ is the only sufficient grounds for man's sins to be forgiven, because of the nature of sin as rebellion against God and the nature of God's complete moral holiness. Islam puts the initiative for obtaining forgiveness on people that they must repent and then prove their repentance with good works. Christianity puts the initiative with God, that He in love and grace provided a way of atoning for mankind's sins while people were still helpless to repent or work well enough to make God's standard.

V. Challenges

Where does this leave us? I think it both our faiths lay before us challenges that we need to consider.

To my Muslim friends, I believe that there are some issues you need to examine. The first issue is historical. Why, if Islam claims to confirm the prior monotheistic faiths, does it go completely against the doctrine of atonement that is found in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament of the Bible, and the New Testament of the Bible as well? That the Jews or Christians corrupted their Scriptures and added this doctrine is not a sufficient answer because the doctrine is too deeply embedded in the fabric of both books, and there is no historical evidence that such changes ever took place. You need to examine the historical issues objectively and decide for yourselves whether or not Islam is right in doing this.

Second, you need to evaluate your own heart before God to determine if it is just weak toward sin, or corrupt. Both of our books claim to present the realistic view of sin. Yet Islam presents the immense reality of sin in our world as a weakness on man's part. It seems contradictory and inadequate to say that we have been born with a neutral or good nature but one that is also weak toward sin. My experience, and the teaching of the Bible, is that education and law are not enough to give me or you the ability to obey God. It also seems an inadequate view of the justice of a perfect God to forgive sin out of hand without requiring a punishment for every sin or to allow fasting or ritual prayers or other penance to make up for sin.

The Bible presents that sin is a much more serious problem than Islam recognizes, that God's holiness is more awesome and uncompromising, and that His love is so deep that He would pay the full price for the guilt of your sin. You need to consider these issues carefully and decide if in Islam you really do have a sufficient answer for your personal sin problem.

Christians, Islam presents us with challenges on this. They assert that the Bible's doctrine of original sin is wrong, and that atonement by the death of Christ on the cross was not necessary, and historically did not happen. You need to wrestle with those claims and come to your own conclusion as to which you think is more realistic and historically true.

Also, Muslims often assert that the Christian doctrine of atonement gives Christians a license to sin. Unfortunately, it is easy to think this with so many people in our culture claiming to be Christians, yet showing so little of the purity of life that Christ commands. Are you living your beliefs? Are you sincerely repenting and grateful for Christ's death for you? Or are you presuming on God's grace? We claim that God has given us His Holy Spirit to help us overcome sin in our lives. Is your life showing the holiness of God because you are living in the power of His Spirit?

VI. Conclusion

I leave these challenges with you and myself. All of us need to do more to fight the sin in our lives and in the world. Let us pledge ourselves to that end, devote ourselves to determining the truth of how God would have us do it, and help one another to do what is good.

If you feel I have been inaccurate or unfair in anything I have said, please tell me so that I can learn and if necessary apologize. May God bless you as you seek truth and fight sin.

Endnotes

1. Fitrah: The Islamic Concept of Human Nature, by Yasien Mohamed, Ta-Ha Publishers, 1996, p. 31. See also the Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam, "Fitrah".
2. Salvation Through Repentance, by A.A. Bilal Philips, Tawheed Publications, 1990, p. 1.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
4. Reported by Anas ibn Maalik, collected by Ibn Maanah. Referred to in Philips, *ibid.*, p. 3.
5. Major Themes of the Qur'an, by Fazlur Rahman, Bibliotheca Islamica, 1980, p. 25, summing up S. 4:128; 17: 11,100; 21:37; 59:9; 64:16; 70:19-21; 75:20.
6. Colin Chapman in Cross & Crescent, IVP, 1995, p. 221.
7. Manfred T. Brauch in Hard Sayings of the Bible, IVP, 1996, p. 550.

8. International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988, volume 4, page 120.