

The Character of God in Bible and Qur'an

A Study In Contrasts

By Pastor Naser Jalali

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen! I think tonight we are witnessing a very exciting event, since it is not very often that Muslims and Christians get together to listen to each other. And I would like to put the emphasis tonight on truly listening to each other.

I have not come here with my boxing gloves. I have not come here to score points or win an intellectual battle. I am sure most of the Christians and the Muslims out in the audience have already raised their defensive walls quite high and are ready for a good fight on the stage. Well, I would like to ask everyone to make a conscious attempt to lower their walls and try to listen empathetically to the position of the other side. After 1400 years of debates and polemical exchanges between Muslims and Christians, a deep gulf of misunderstanding still separates the two communities of faith.

Just to cite one example, a great contemporary Muslim writer, Shabbir Akhtar, can still say,

"Most Muslims, including educated ones, know next to nothing about Christology. Few Muslims can distinguish clearly between the view that a man claims to be divine - a blasphemy - and the entirely different view according to which God volunteers to become human - the orthodox Christian conviction. And both of these views are routinely confused with the heretical doctrine that God 'adopted' a son... A Muslim cannot reasonably claim to be seriously engaged in dialogue with Christians unless he can possess a thorough knowledge of the Christian faith..."[1]

Of course, one can put the same charge towards Christians and their ignorance of the Islamic faith and the many negative stereotyped images that Christians have developed against Muslims.

So, once again, my request is that tonight we would all make an extra effort to really listen and thus take one step closer towards a mutual understanding of each other's position.

Having said that, I must note that I am not advocating that we ought to brush aside the deep and genuine differences that divide Islam and Christianity. In fact, in my lecture tonight, I would like to highlight five points of tension that I notice as a Christian when I compare the doctrine of God as it is developed in the Christian faith with the view of God expounded by the Qur'an and historic, orthodox Islamic theology.

I would like to start with an analogy. I am not very musically minded, but I can imagine that if one immerses himself or herself in the musical style of a great composer, one can tell which pieces belong to the genuine composition of this great musician and which pieces are not genuine. One begins to develop a "feel"

for what a composer sounds like. I guess that same thing can be true of great painters or the great poets. Some of you might know the "feel" of the poetry of Hafiz or Rumi so well, that you can immediately tell if a piece of poetry is written by them or not.

In a same way, when I pay close attention to the character of God portrayed for us through the biblical narratives and then I compare it with the Qur'an, I get the strong sense that the Qur'an plays a different tune, that it does not exactly match the God of the Bible, even though the Qur'an claims to be from the same God.

This is not an exhaustive list, but I would like to bring to your attention, five areas of disagreement between these two portraits of God. These areas concern the issues of THE INTIMACY OF GOD (with his people), THE SUFFERING OF GOD, THE LOVE OF GOD, THE KNOWABILITY OF GOD (the question regarding whether we can know the character of God, what God is like), and THE HOLINESS OF GOD.

The reason that I would like to focus on these fundamental characteristics is that they provide the foundational basis for such distinctive Christian concepts as the doctrine of the Trinity, the incarnation and the atonement. Oftentimes, Muslims and Christians argue ad infinitum about these specific Christian doctrines and don't come to any better understanding of each other, because they have not realized that their disagreement about the nature of God is even more foundational than they had thought. There is no use talking about more advanced concepts, if we don't even have the basics down, no use arguing about the complex formulas of advanced calculus, if we have not understood the simple principles of arithmetic.

So, let me now elaborate on what I mean by these areas of disagreement that I have highlighted.

I. The Intimacy of God

A. The dominant Qu'ranic picture is that of a master and servant. Even though there is a Qu'ranic verse that claims that God is closer to the people than their own jugular vein,[2] nevertheless, the idea of God's intimacy with his people is not very much developed in the Qur'an or in orthodox Islamic theology. In fact, Sura 50:16, is set in the context of the angels recording man's deeds for the day of judgment. God is constantly referred to as a Sovereign Master (although he is Rahman and Rahim). He is gracious and is the source of all the bounties of the earth, but overall the image is that he is far above and beyond the struggles and the tragedies in the human realm.

Once again, Shabbir Akhtar gives us the following insightful comments:

Visitors to the famous Cordoba mosque in Spain cannot fail to read the ubiquitous inscription, 'He is the dominant (Huwal-ghalib)'. What a revealing index to the Muslim mind![3]

Furthermore,

Muslims do not see God as their father or, equivalently, themselves as the children of God. Men are servants of a just master; they cannot, in orthodox Islam, typically attain any greater degree of intimacy with their creator.[4]

Kenneth Cragg, in his classic book, *The Call of the Minaret*, points to the same basic insight. After briefly reviewing the 99 most beautiful names of God (*Asma' al-Husna*) in the Qur'an, he observes,

This eternal and all-encompassing God is described as "the Creator," "the Fashioner," "the Life-Giver," "the Provider," "the Opener," "the Bestower," "the Prevailer." God brings to life and brings to death, is "the Reckoner" and "the Recorder," "the King of Kingship" and "the Lord of the Worlds." It is repeatedly declared in the Qur'an that there is no strength and no power save in God, who "is over all things supreme." ...

The relative frequency with which the different names occur is a matter of deep interest. Terms, or their corresponding verbs, that have to do with strength, majesty, and greatness are most prominent.[5]

B. Of course, the Bible also presents us with the picture of a Sovereign God who is the infinite one and the creator of the universe. However, the Biblical faith also describes God's relationship with his people in many tender passages in which God is portrayed as a father who teaches his child to walk (Deut. 1:31, Hosea 11:1-4),[6] a shepherd who carries his lamb in his arms (Isa. 40:11),[7] a lover who woos his beloved, and even a husband who longs for his unfaithful wife to return (Jer. 3:1,12,14).[8]

We are confronted with a God who dwells in the midst of his people and desires to have an intimate relationship with them. The book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible, gives us a glimpse of the fulfillment of God's relationship with his people, when the author states,

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." [Rev. 21:3-4]

II. The Suffering of God

A. The God of the Qur'an shows his mercy to humankind by sending prophets to guide the people to the straight path. God sends prophets to various people

groups but judges the disobedient nations (oftentimes by destroying them) when they don't listen to God's prophets (see the Sura of the poets, al-Shuara, as one example of this prominent Qu'ranic theme). God's dealings with people are reported in a very matter of fact way. To cite one example, I would like to focus your attention on the stories of Noah. The Qu'ranic passages, which have more of an extended treatment of Noah, are found in Sura 7:59-64; 11:25-49; 23:23-30; 26:105-122; 37:75-82; 54:9-15; and Sura 71:1-28 which is the Sura of Nuh. In all these passages, Noah warns his people, they disbelieve in his message and God sends the flood to destroy the unbelievers. Period. We are not told anything about how any of this, whether the peoples' sinfulness or the judgment of God, affects God himself.

B. The Bible on the other hand presents us with a God who suffers because of his disobedient people. He is grieved, he is angered. The prophets of Israel reveal him as a wounded lover, a husband who feels the pain of betrayal because of his unfaithful wife, and a father whose heart is broken because of his rebellious children. I will get back to these images, but to continue our example of Noah, let's begin by looking at Gen. 6:5-7 :

The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain. So the LORD said, "I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth - men and animals, and creatures that move along the ground, and birds of the air - for I am grieved that I have made them."

Please note the emphasis of the text on the suffering of God in that in the space of two verses, three times we are informed that God was grieved, filled with pain and grieved. The significance of this repetition is pointed out by the eminent German Old Testament scholar, Claus Westermann, who writes, "Yahweh's regret is so important for the [writer] that he puts it before the decision to destroy and repeats it again after it. He considered it decisive for the understanding of the event which these verses introduce." [9] As Walter Brueggemann, a prominent American OT scholar puts it, "The narrative is not about the anger of God but about the grief of God." [10]

Due to the shortness of time, let me draw your attention to only one more passage in the OT. The prophet Hosea, describes the intimacy of God's relationship with Israel in terms of the intimacy of a husband and wife and a father and child. But God brings a charge against Israel for being an unfaithful wife, by going after idols, and a rebellious child. Commenting on the imageries of Hosea, one of the most profound Jewish thinkers of the 20th century, Abraham Heschel, writes, "Hosea has given us a supreme expression of the vision of the subjective God so typical for prophetic awareness." He continues:

God is conceived, not as a self-detached Ruler, but as the sensitive Consort to Whom deception comes and Who nevertheless goes on pleading for loyalty, uttering a longing for a reunion, a passionate desire for reconciliation....

Hosea is able to express as no other prophet the love of God for Israel in its most varied forms - as compassion, as a mother's tenderness, as love between husband and wife.[11]

And a Christian commentator, Terrence Fretheim, describes the language of Hosea in this way,

The image here, obviously, is not that of some heavenly General Patton having difficulty tolerating acts of insubordination. Rather, it is the image of the long-suffering parent and, given the roles in child rearing in Israel, it is probably more the image of mother than father. God is pictured as one in great anguish over what the children have done, but her love is such that she cannot let go. [12]

Fretheim beautifully summarizes the impact of these various images,

God has been rejected both as parent and as husband! God is like a person who has been rejected not only by his spouse but by his children as well. God suffers the effects of the broken relationship at multiple levels of intimacy. The wounds of God are manifold.[13]

It should be noted that this divine suffering is not because God is weak, but because he is love and one cannot truly love without opening oneself up to risking the possibility of rejection and the pain which results from it.

III. The Love of God

A. Much ink has been shed on this issue, portraying Islam as having an unloving God. That is not true, but nevertheless, the Qu'ranic picture is quite different. God loves the good, not the unlovely and the sinner.

That God does not love the sinner is abundantly clear in the Qur'an. Note these key verses from the Qur'an:

"Allah loves not transgressors" (2:190);

"He loves not creatures ungrateful or wicked" (2:276);

"Say: 'Obey Allah and His Apostle;' but if they turn back Allah loves not those who reject Faith." (3:32);

"Allah loves not those who do wrong" (3:57, 140);

"Allah loves not the arrogant, the vainglorious" (4:36).

"Say, if ye love Allah, follow me; Allah will love and forgive you your sins." (3:31)

The Qur'an is littered with dozens of verses like this. It is a fact, nowhere in the Qur'an is God ever reported to love someone who does not love Him first, nor is God's love ever used as the central motivating factor to draw someone close to Him.

B. In contrast, both the Old and New Testaments record that God loves everyone regardless of their sin. In the Bible, we see God as not only the initiator of love but as one who loves those who are his enemies.

"The Lord did not set his love upon you, nor choose you, because you were more in number than any people; for you [were] the fewest of all people...." (Deut. 7:7)

In the New Testament we see that God's love for sinful man is given as the primary reason He sent Jesus Christ.

"For God so loved the world He gave His One and Only Son.... (John 3:16). Also, "This is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. " (I John 4:10) And, "We love, because He first loved us." (I John 4:19)

C. The concept of Grace is radically different in the two religions!

IV. The Knowability of God

A. This point becomes a bit heavy on the philosophical side, but I would appreciate your patience here, because it has profound practical ramifications. Despite all the names of God in the Qur'an, in orthodox Islam we confront a God who is basically unknowable. These names do not tell us anything about what God is like but only how God has willed to act. God's actions do not reflect God's nature.

Al-Ghazali, the most prominent theologian in the history of Islam, went so far as to say:

"The end result of the knowledge of the *`arifin* is their inability to know Him, and their knowledge is, in truth, that they do not know Him and that it is absolutely impossible for them to know Him." [14]

Fadlou Shehadi, a contemporary scholar of Al-Ghazali, after analyzing Al-Ghazali's arguments about the transcendence of God, concludes,

From all the foregoing, one important consequence has to be drawn.

God is Utterly Unknowable

If God is a unique kind of being unlike any other being in any respect, more specifically, unlike anything known to man, it would have to follow by Ghazali's own principles that God is utterly unknowable. For, according to Ghazali, things are known by their likenesses, and what is utterly unlike what is known to man cannot be known. Furthermore, God would have to be unknowable, completely unknowable, not only to 'the man in the street', but to prophets and mystics as well. This is a conclusion that Ghazali states very explicitly and not infrequently. It is also a view that is often stated independently of its logical relation to God's utter uniqueness.[15]

Another contemporary scholar of Islam, Isma`il al-Faruqi expresses the mainstream Islamic thinking on the inability of humans to know God, when he writes:

He [God] does not reveal Himself to anyone in any way. God reveals only His will. Remember one of the prophets asked God to reveal Himself and God told him, "No, it is not possible for Me to reveal Myself to anyone. "...This is God's will and that is all we have, and we have it in perfection in the Qur'an. But Islam does not equate the Qur'an with the nature or essence of God. It is the Word of God, the Commandment of God, and the Will of God. But God does not reveal Himself to anyone. Christians talk about the revelation of God Himself - by God of God - but that is the great difference between Christianity and Islam. God is transcendent, and once you talk about self-revelation you have hierophancy and immanence, and then the transcendence of God is compromised. You may not have complete transcendence and self-revelation at the same time.[16]

Shabbir Akhtar, again:

The Koran, unlike the Gospel, never comments on the essence of Allah. 'Allah is wise' or 'Allah is loving' may be pieces of revealed information but, in contrast to Christianity, Muslims are not enticed to claim that 'Allah is Love' or 'Allah is Wisdom'. Only adjectival descriptions are attributed to the divine being and these merely as they bear on the revelation of God's will for man. The rest remains mysterious.[17]

Kenneth Cragg:

"[all the attributes] are to be understood finally as characteristics of the divine will rather than laws of the divine nature. Action, that is

arising from such descriptives may be expected, but not as a matter of necessity. What gives unity to all God's dealings is that God wills them all. He as Willer may be recognized from time to time by means of the descriptions given. But God does not essentially conform to any of them. The act of the divine will may be identified in this or that quality; the will itself is inscrutable. One may not, therefore, say that God is necessarily loving, holy, righteous, clement, or relenting, in every and all relationships.

It is this fact that explains the antithesis in certain of the Names. Such antithesis would not be theologically predicable if either element within it were essential to God's nature. Because they are not, God's action may demonstrate each element in differing relations. The antithesis is dogmatically resolved in the realm of will, in that God wills both - in every other sense and realm, antithesis remains. But the problem has no anguish and is, indeed, inscrutable, given the conviction of the divine will as an ultimate beyond which neither reason nor revelation go. So God is "the One who leads astray," as well as "the One who guides." God is "the One who brings damage," as also does Satan. God is described also by terms such as "the Bringer-down," "the Compeller" or "Tyrant," "the Haughty" - all of which, when humanly used, have an evil sense. In the unity of the single will, however, these descriptions coexist with those that relate to mercy, compassion, and glory."[18]

B. The biblical emphasis is that God has revealed himself and our highest calling is to know God and be in intimate relationship with him (e.g., Jer. 9:23-24; Matt. 11:27; Jn. 1:18; Jn. 17:3; II Cor. 4:6).

This is what the LORD says:

"Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom
or the strong man boast of his strength
or the rich man boast of his riches,
but let him who boasts boast about this:
that he understands and knows me,
that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness,
justice and righteousness on earth,
for in these I delight," declares the LORD. [Jer. 9:23-24]

All things have been committed to me by my Father.
No one knows the Son except the Father,
and no one knows the Father except the Son
and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." [Mt. 11:27]

No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known. [John 1:18]

Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.
[John 17:3]

For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.
[II Cor. 4:6]

God is as God has acted! In the Christian faith the actions of God in the history of redemption provide the basis for the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. God has revealed himself in the history of redemption by showing himself to be our Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier. We see a God who is not only above us as our heavenly Father, but with us in Christ (Immanuel) and in us through the Holy Spirit.

V. The Holiness of God

A. Even though Muslims often give the impression that Islam presents a loftier picture of God's forgiveness, because God just forgives when people repent and does not need any bloody sacrifices to atone for people's sin, the Qur'an is at odds with the biblical emphasis on God's holiness and his requirement for sacrifices.

B. As a Christian, I find it incredible that the adjective Holy (Quddus) is only used twice of God in the Qur'an. See Leviticus as the heart of the Torah. This is the basis for the heart of the Christian view of atonement. Guthrie explains the need for the atonement such:

Costly Love

If God already loves and forgives us, why atonement at all? Why did Jesus have to die to reconcile us to God? Why did not God just say, "I forgive you," and let it go at that?

We can catch a glimpse of the answer with an analogy in human relationships. Suppose that I have done something that betrays a friendship and hurts a friend. Suppose that I go to her to tell her how sorry I am and how bad I feel about it, and she says to me, "That's OK. It doesn't make any difference. Forget it." Has she forgiven me? What she has really said is, "I don't care enough about you to be bothered by anything you say or do. You are not that important to me." She also leaves me alone with the pain of my

guilt, refusing to help me deal with it, put it behind me, and make a fresh beginning with her.

Good-natured indulgence and casual acceptance are not forgiveness and love but an expression of indifference and sometimes hostility. Real love and forgiveness mean caring enough to be hurt, caring enough to put ourselves in others' shoes and sharing their guilt as if it were our own. Real love and forgiveness are costly - not in the sense that the guilty party must squeeze them out of the injured party but in the sense that the injured party genuinely sympathizes with the guilty and shares his or her pain.

Why did Jesus have to die? Why atonement? Because God cares for us too much to dismiss our sin and guilt with a flippant "It doesn't matter." Because words were not enough: action was necessary to prove that God's love and forgiveness are genuine. Because God wanted to stand with us in the loneliness and alienation we bring on ourselves when we separate ourselves from God and other people. Because it is just when God comes to our side in our loneliness, alienation, and guilt that they are overcome. In the cross God says to us, "Yes, it is true. You have hurt and offended me. But I still love you. Therefore I will make your guilt and its consequences my own. I will suffer with you - for you - to make things right between us again." [19]

Notes:

[1] Shabbir Akhtar, *A Faith For All Seasons*, Chicago, Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 1990, p. 182.

[2] It was We Who created man, and We know what dark suggestions his soul makes to him: for We are nearer to him than (his) jugular vein. [Q. 50:16] (also see Sura 2:186; 34:50; 56:85; 57:4 on "nearness").

When My servants ask thee concerning Me, I am indeed close (to them): I listen to the prayer of every suppliant when he calleth on Me: Let them also, with a will, Listen to My call, and believe in Me: That they may walk in the right way. [Q. 2:186]

Say: "If I am astray, I only stray to the loss of my own soul: but if I receive guidance, it is because of the inspiration of my Lord to me: it is He Who hears all things, and is (ever) near." [Q. 34:50]

But We are nearer to him than ye, and yet see not,- [Q. 56:85]

He it is Who created the heavens and the earth in Six Days, and is moreover firmly established on the Throne (of Authority). He knows what enters within the

earth and what comes forth out of it, what comes down from heaven and what mounts up to it. And He is with you wheresoever ye may be. And God sees well all that ye do. [Q. 57:4]

[3] Akhtar, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 180.

[5] Kenneth Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret*, 2nd ed., New York, Orbis Books, 1992, p. 35.

[6] There you saw how the LORD your God carried you, as a father carries his son, all the way you went until you reached this place. [Deut. 1:31]

"When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. But the more I called Israel, the further they went from me. They sacrificed to the Baals and they burned incense to images. It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms; but they did not realize it was I who healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love; I lifted the yoke from their neck and bent down to feed them. [Hosea 11:1-4]

[7] He tends his flock like a shepherd:
He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young. [Isaiah 40:11]

[8] "If a man divorces his wife and she leaves him and marries another man, should he return to her again?
Would not the land be completely defiled?
But you have lived as a prostitute with many lovers - would you now return to me?" declares the LORD.
Go, proclaim this message toward the north:
"Return, faithless Israel," declares the LORD, "I will frown on you no longer, for I am merciful," declares the LORD, "I will not be angry forever.
"Return, faithless people," declares the LORD, "for I am your husband. I will choose you - one from a town and two from a clan - and bring you to Zion. [Jeremiah 3:1,12,14]

[9] Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984, p. 407.

[10] Walter Brueggemann, "A Shape for Old Testament Theology," in *The Flowering of Old Testament Theology*, Ollenburger, Martens, Hasel, eds., Winoma Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1992, p. 418.

[11] Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets*, New York, The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1962, pp. 48-49.

[12] Terrence Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1984, p. 120.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 116.

[14] Fadlou Shehadi, *Ghazali's Unique Unknowable God*, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1964, p. 37. The *`arifin*, literally "the knowers", used by mystics in the sense of "gnostics".

[15] *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22. Later on p. 48, he also states Thus the uncompromising character of Ghazali's agnosticism follows logically from his uncompromising stand on the utter difference of God's nature.

[16] al-Faruqi, *Christian Mission and Islamic Da`wah: Proceedings of the Chambèsy Dialogue Consultation* [held 1976 in Chambèsy, Switzerland], (Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 1982), pp. 47-48

[17] Akhtar, *op. cit.*, pp. 180-181.

[18] Cragg, *op. cit.*, p. 36-37.

[19] Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, Revised Edition, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994, p. 260