

## Theological Differences Between Christianity and Islam

The first need in presenting Islam to people of a Christian background is to understand what beliefs Christians have. The purpose of this essay is to present the beliefs of the major sects of Christianity in terms of what they are and how they differ from Islamic beliefs. An analysis of Christian and Islamic sources will form the basis of the study.

On the face of it, few notice how much Christianity and Islam are alike in basic beliefs. On the five pillars of Islamic belief: the belief in God, angels, the prophets, the sacred books, and the Day of Judgement, there is no basic disagreement. Christians also believe in all of these, although they would define the one God in three persons and take one prophet and one sacred book fewer than in Islam. But all agree on the principles. Unfortunately, the reality is not that simple. That extra book and prophet are most essential to Islam, to say nothing of the absolute unity of God, whereas the five pillars, to the Christian, miss some of the basic issues.

One of the fundamental differences between Islam and Christianity is that while Islam has a basic set of beliefs in common to nearly all who claim to be Muslims, there is hardly anything that is common to all of Christianity. There are important exceptions to all major Christian beliefs, and although most Christians are members of the top ten, there are about twenty thousand Christian sects, some of which are more visible in propagation than their number of adherents would suggest. That is why it is necessary from the beginning to find out what the individual in question believes. One cannot make assumptions.

In the following study Christian belief is presented as a logical, historical development that diversified in the face of precise historical challenges. This is the context that explains the great diversity in Christian belief, and provides a coherent way of perceiving it as a whole.

Although Christianity should be seen historically as the product of a certain trend among syncretic religious movements in the Roman Empire during the first three centuries of the common era, the history of its beliefs can be studied as beginning with Biblical roots. Almost all Christian groups still claim some

kind of adherence to the Bible. Furthermore, most groups also provide creeds, statements of faith made at particular times ostensibly to proclaim absolute truth, but in fact to defend faith from contemporary attacks upon it. The variations in the creeds thus reflect the history of the crises in Christian belief, as well as the differences between sects.

The purpose of this study is not to provide a comprehensive, objective view of the development of Christian belief. Rather, it is to provide a factual but selective view of Christian doctrine as it can be related to Islamic belief, for the purpose of helping Muslims to situate and understand Christian beliefs as a whole, as they relate to Islamic beliefs, with minimal effort.

## 1. The Torah (Tawrat) Sources

The first text in many Christian catechisms, or manuals for teaching Christian doctrine, is the Decalogue from Exodus 20: 1–17. This is the text upon which all of the Christian Creeds have been founded, each modifying the original for the specific purpose of defending the Christian faith in times of doctrinal disagreement. A majority of Christian catechisms suggest a development of religion through three documents: the Decalogue, some portion of Matthew six or the Sermon on the Mount, and the creed.

The text of the Decalogue can be divided into two sections. In fact, the Decalogue is described in the Exodus story as having been written on two stone tablets. There are slight differences in the way the Decalogue is divided into two by the various sects, but nearly all agree that the first part refers to how we should relate to God, and the second part refers to how we should relate to other people.

The first part of the Decalogue in the Authorised Version is as follows.

*3 Thou shalt have no other gods before me.*

*4 Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth:*

*5 Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me;*

*6 And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.*

*7 Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.*

The text is couched in negatives, but the first article is clearly the establishment of the unicity of God. There is only one God. There is no god but God. This is followed by logical corollaries, that is, that no images of God may be made and worshiped, and that the name of God must be held in special esteem.

Finally, the implication is drawn that since there is only one God, He is sovereign and must be loved and obeyed.

The basic structure of positing God first and then several logical corollaries afterward continues to be the format for nearly all Christian creeds and statements of faith. A comparison of some of these with the Decalogue will reveal not only the spread of Christian belief, but how it has developed from this beginning.

The rest of the Decalogue is a logical development from the sovereignty of God as it implies a certain kind of behaviour towards other people. The second part of the Decalogue is as follows in the Authorised Version.

*8 Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.*

*9 Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work:*

*10 But the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates:*

*11 For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it.*

*12 Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee.*

*13 Thou shalt not kill.*

*14 Thou shalt not commit adultery.*

*15 Thou shalt not steal.*

*16 Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.*

*17 Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbour's.*

The first article, that on the Sabbath, establishes the authority of God based on creatorship and limits human authority over subordinates, showing that children, workers, and even animals have non-negotiable rights that must not be infringed upon. The second positive command is to honour parents. Then there are the final prohibitions of killing, adultery, stealing, giving false testimony, and coveting.

About half of the Decalogue deals with the unity of God and human responsibility towards God. The other half deals with duties relating to other people in consideration of the sovereignty of God as Creator

of all things. The Christian Scriptures consistently maintain the Decalogue as normative. It is the only extensive text in the Bible which is portrayed as being revealed directly by God, without the means of a prophet.

We shall see in the sections to follow how Christian belief has departed from the principles of the Decalogue and come into conflict with it. Islam does not conflict with it, but has focused on new issues that have arisen over time. The former is disastrous, while the latter is merely dangerous. The three popular traditions can be caricaturised as follows. Jews have circumvented the obligations of the Decalogue by focusing on the importance of belonging to the chosen people. Christians have circumvented the obligations of the Decalogue by claiming that belief in the death of Jesus (as) as a substitutionary sacrifice for sin makes everything all right. In practice, Muslims often think that doing ones prayers faithfully or going on pilgrimage atones for anything and everything they have done, so why not live an unjust life, and at the end of it go to Mecca and set it all right? All three traditions start out with the obligation of obedience and an ethical imperative. All three provide a way to escape doing what God says, but of the three, Islam at least is salvageable.

## **2. The Christian Creeds as an Expression of Christian Belief**

Two things will become apparent as we examine the Christian Creeds. Firstly, they follow the structure of the Decalogue, beginning with the doctrine of God and following with its logical consequences. Secondly, the Christian Creeds, unlike Islamic confessions of faith, conflict with the Decalogue, and thus put Christianity in the position of having to explain why it has departed from a basic revelation which it ostensibly accepts.

It is popular among Christians to consider that there are three early creeds which are accepted by many Christian establishments. These appear in modern times in a number of versions, and an academic study of them would have to depend on the most ancient manuscripts in the original language. Any of the popular versions of today, however, will serve our purpose, and the three below are the versions as published by Anglican sources.

### **2.1 The Apostles' Creed**

The briefest creed is called The Apostles' Creed. I have divided it into the two basic parts corresponding to the division of the Decalogue, the first dealing with the belief in God, and the second with the logical additions to that.

*1. I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit,*

*2. the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.*

The Apostles' Creed contrasts with the Decalogue in being a proclamation of what "I believe," Latin *credo*, from which comes the English word *creed*. The Decalogue is a divine declaration rather than a human one, the I who is speaking claims to be God Himself rather than a human being. This is the first great departure from true faith, the rejection of what God says and its replacement with what I believe. The results in Christianity are far-reaching and will be constantly met in any given contact.

The second contrast is the way in which the figure of God is dealt with. Instead of an absolute unicity, there is the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. These are not overtly defined as one God in three persons, but the implication is there. The emphasis is rather on the narrative of Jesus from a cosmic point of view.

The importance of not worshipping images and the centrality of the name of God in life and worship are neglected in the Apostles' Creed, and this neglect is generally reflected in the major historical manifestations of Christianity.

In the second section, there is a complete ignoring of the Decalogue principles, which are replaced with new values. The Decalogue makes the family, parents with limited authority under God, the basic unit of society. In The Apostles' Creed, the authority of the Church is the primary doctrine, the point of departure, here called catholic or universal. In the light of that, the communion of the saints, that is, the members of the Church, takes the place of the Sabbath proclamation of non-negotiable rights for man and beast and the command to honour parents. That is, basic human rights and the centrality of the family as the basic unit of society are replaced by Church authority and community. This explains the weakness of the family in Christian societies, as compared to Jewish and Islamic ones. The commandments in the rest of the Decalogue are accepted by Christianity, but in the creed they become the sins which God forgives through the mediation of Church authority. Furthermore, those who submit to the Church have the promise of the resurrection of the body and everlasting life.

The resurrection of the body and everlasting life are clear additions to the Decalogue. These are not made by the early Christian Church, however. They are the result of a post-exilic conflict in Judaism, where the sect of Pharisees adhered to the belief in angels, judgment, and resurrection, while the sect of Sadducees did not. The Pharisaical interpretation has been transmitted to Christianity, and further, to Islam.

Although the history of Christendom is more complex, and the Apostles' Creed does not actually reflect with accuracy Christianity in its first centuries, the Apostles' Creed can be used as a simple point of departure. The other Creeds expand upon its various features and especially in the later ones even disagree with it, little by little producing the various distinct sectarian doctrines.

## 2.2 The Nicene Creed

*1. We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen. We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father. Through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end. We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified. He has spoken through the Prophets.*

*2. We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.*

The Nicene Creed is probably the first truly historical document, that is, there was probably a real Creed produced at the Council of Nicea, and it is not a later fiction as is The Apostles' Creed. However, the Nicene Creed as presented above is a Western, Protestant view of it with a number of additions, including the replacement of "I" with "we." The original manuscripts have not survived, and there is good reason to think that the doctrine of the Trinity had not yet taken so clear a form by the time of the Council of Nicea in the fourth century. Nevertheless, this version gives us some notable expansions over The Apostles' Creed.

The Apostles' Creed is inadequate to impose the Trinity, the belief in one God eternally existing in three distinct persons. Therefore, the Nicene Creed goes to some length to define the three persons of the Trinity. Jesus is declared outright to be God. In this version the Holy Ghost is said to proceed from the Father and the Son, a point which was never accepted in the Orthodox Church. The Latin filioque, and from the Son, remains a major point of doctrinal contention between Western Christianity (Rome and Protestantism) and Orthodoxy. This argument had not yet arisen at the time of Nicea, and its inclusion here is an obvious anachronism.

The addition of one baptism reflects a very complex history of the Christian institution. The early historical practice of a purity system with ablutions is only partially the origin of Christian baptism, which has antecedents in the oriental mysteries which were so popular in the Roman Empire in the first centuries of the common era. The expression "one baptism" effectively represses the remnants of ablutions and the concept of purity in Christianity. Baptism takes on a heavy load of meaning as an initiatory rite of entrance into the Church, the role it had in the mystery cults.

The catholic or universal Church, which was adequate in the Apostles' Creed, needs bolstering here. Now the claim is put forward that the Church is Apostolic, that is, it has the seal of approval of the direct

disciples of Christ. The concept of an authoritative Church was not easy to get across, and was not actually even fully established when Constantine made it the religion of the empire. The original concept of the ekklesia or “church” was a calling out of institutions, as the etymology of the Greek word implies, and not a calling into an authoritative establishment.

## **2.3 The Athanasian Creed**

*1. Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the Catholic Faith. Which Faith except everyone do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly. And the Catholic Faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity, neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Substance. For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Ghost. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, is all one, the Glory equal, the Majesty co-eternal. Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Ghost. The Father uncreate, the Son uncreate, and the Holy Ghost uncreate. The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Ghost incomprehensible. The Father eternal, the Son eternal, and the Holy Ghost eternal. And yet they are not three eternals, but one eternal.*

*As also there are not three incomprehensibles, nor three uncreated, but one uncreated, and one incomprehensible. So likewise the Father is Almighty, the Son Almighty, and the Holy Ghost Almighty. And yet they are not three Almighties, but one Almighty. So the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Ghost is God. And yet they are not three Gods, but one God. So likewise the Father is Lord, the Son Lord, and the Holy Ghost Lord. And yet not three Lords, but one Lord. For like as we are compelled by the Christian verity to acknowledge every Person by himself to be both God and Lord, So are we forbidden by the Catholic Religion, to say, There be three Gods, or three Lords. The Father is made of none, neither created, nor begotten. The Son is of the Father alone, not made, nor created, but begotten.*

*The Holy Ghost is of the Father and of the Son, neither made, nor created, nor begotten, but proceeding. So there is one Father, not three Fathers; one Son, not three Sons; one Holy Ghost, not three Holy Ghosts. And in this Trinity none is afore, or after other; none is greater, or less than another; But the whole three Persons are co-eternal together and co-equal. So that in all things, as is aforesaid, the Unity in Trinity and the Trinity in Unity is to be worshipped. He therefore that will be saved is must think thus of the Trinity. Furthermore, it is necessary to everlasting salvation that he also believe rightly the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

*For the right Faith is, that we believe and confess, that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and Man; God, of the substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds; and Man of the Substance of his Mother, born in the world; Perfect God and perfect Man, of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting. Equal to the Father, as touching his Godhead; and inferior to the Father, as touching his Manhood; Who, although he be God and Man, yet he is not two, but one Christ; One, not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh but by taking of the Manhood into God; One altogether; not by confusion of*

*Substance, but by unity of Person. For as the reasonable soul and flesh is one man, so God and Man is one Christ; Who suffered for our salvation, descended into hell, rose again the third day from the dead. He ascended into heaven, he sitteth at the right hand of the Father, God Almighty, from whence he will come*

*2. to judge the quick and the dead. At whose coming all men will rise again with their bodies and shall give account for their own works. And they that have done good shall go into life everlasting; and they that have done evil into everlasting fire. This is the Catholic Faith, which except a man believe faithfully, he cannot be saved.*

The first point that appears in contrast with the Nicene Creed is the emphasis on the eternity of the Son, which was overlooked in the briefer Creed. Any loophole in the theological definition of God produced its followers in the early centuries of Christianity. The attempt to define God theologically inexorably led to such a situation.

At this point it is clear that the Creed is the result of heated controversy. It was not easy to impose the doctrine of the Trinity on early Christians. The Arian controversy was long and bloody. Yet this version of the Athanasian Creed is a corrupted Western, Protestant view. It contains the Roman filioque which is again an interpolation never accepted by Orthodoxy. But besides that, it contains a hint of the separate natures of Christ, the unmixed human and divine natures, which is also the result of a later controversy, which divided the Eastern Orthodox Churches (Syrian, Coptic, et al.) from Greek and Roman Christianity. The Monophysite Churches in the Middle East accept only one nature in the Son, a nature that is both human and divine in the incarnation.

The controversy over the Trinity resulted in a strong expression of anathema. Those who did not accept the Creed were stated to be lost, cast into Hell. Thus, the emphasis of Christianity came to be adherence to a belief system set in creedal formula, rather than a personal acceptance of God's sovereignty and consequent obedience, as in Islam. The development of sectarianism in Christianity reflects this emphasis on what you believe rather than what you do. Some Christians criticize Islam as being a religion of works rather than faith or belief.

The Athanasian Creed is of such complexity that the ordinary person, at least one not caught up in the intricacies of Christian theology, may have difficulty seeing the importance of its statements, and even their meaning. Once the Trinity is a full-blown doctrine, it by-passes some of the basic reasoning processes, to a ponderous and authoritarian pronouncement of "truth" rather than an illumination of it. This has a ramification in the theology of the Church. The Church in Roman understanding holds the *magisterium*, or authority to teach without submitting its arguments to the judgement of the individual mind. This attitude is prevalent even among others that Roman Catholics, one might say especially among Protestants. The authority of the Church in maintaining the doctrine of the Trinity is generally of far greater weight with the Christian than are the conclusions of his own reason and logic.

The polemic tone of the Athanasian Creed above is removed from it as it appears in the actual liturgy of the Coptic Orthodox Church. As published in English, the reference to the Monophysite doctrine is missing, as well as the Latin filioque, which would be entirely unacceptable in any Orthodox setting. Although taken from a Coptic source, the following is essentially the same as that found among the Greek Orthodox and its sister rites.

*1. We believe in one God, God the Father, the Pantocrator, who created heaven and earth, and all things seen and unseen. We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only-Begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all ages; Light of light, true God of true God, begotten not created, of one essence with the Father, by whom all things were made; Who for us men and our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and of the Virgin Mary, and became Man. And he was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, suffered and was buried. And the third day He rose from the dead, according to the scriptures, ascended into the heavens; he sits at the right hand of his Father, and He is coming again in his glory to judge the living and the dead, whose kingdom shall have no end. Yes, we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Life-Giver, who proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets.*

*2. And in one holy, catholic and apostolic church. We confess one baptism for the remission of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the coming age. Amen.*

Put very succinctly, the variations on Christian belief turn on a very few points. The whole of Western Christianity has come from the Roman Church and shares its basic creed, which is distinct in its addition of the filioque, that is, that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father *and the Son*. The Greek Orthodox agree with the Western Church on all creedal points except this one, and believe that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father alone. The Eastern Orthodox form a position over and against that of both Roman and Greek Catholics. They hold the Monophysite doctrine that the incarnate Son has only one nature, which is wholly divine and wholly human at one and the same time. Roman and Greek Catholics maintain that the Son in incarnation has two natures unmixed, one human and one divine.

From a creedal standpoint, Protestantism agrees with Roman Catholicism in the issues of the Trinity. Its point of creedal independence from Rome lies mainly in its concept of the Church. Furthermore, Protestantism is broken into many sects based on differing concepts of the Church on one hand, and additional points of doctrine on the other.

Some of the major Protestant concepts of the Church seem to be as follows. First of all, there is a broad understanding that the Church is a spiritual rather than visible institution, and that the universal Church of Christ is his mystical body, made up of all true believers. This rather spiritualized concept was developed apparently to facilitate Protestant rejection of Roman authority. However, within that rarified concept, Protestants have developed particular visible forms. Some of these maintain the system of bishops within a national framework, as found among Anglicans and Lutherans. The Reformed or Calvinistic concept retains the national Church under a system of presiding elders instead of bishops.

The congregational concept is often seen to be a body of believers covenanted together, whose clergy draw their authority from the congregation, which works in a democratic way. This visible church of believers rejects the principle of a national Church. It should be noted that Protestantism is a logical continuation of the replacing of the family with the Church. The loss of family authority resulted in the elevation of the individual. The individual in society became the basic unit of the theory of national government. The concept of the Church thus evolved naturally in the direction it did. It must be remembered that the breakdown of Roman structures in the Reformation did not change the basic mind-set, even with the rejection of the *magisterium*. Although Protestantism emphasizes the role of the mind in belief, the Church still retains its hegemony over individual reason. The splintering into a plethora of sects, each with its particular configuration of beliefs, was inevitable.

It is remarkable, however, that the doctrine of atonement is not overtly explained in the creeds. The death and resurrection of Jesus, as well as the forgiveness of sins, are mentioned. But the connection between that vicarious sacrifice on the cross and forgiveness is not made. The atonement is nevertheless central to Christian belief. The creeds assume the belief that humankind is totally helpless and lost in sinfulness, and completely dependent on the death and resurrection of Jesus in order to escape condemnation on the Day of Judgement and punishment in hell fire. But they do not express that belief clearly. It is probable that the lack of controversy on the atonement as compared to the Trinity accounts for this omission. The simplest creeds lack a complete exposition of the Trinity as well.

**It is in the three great central doctrines of Christianity that it is most clearly distinguished from Islamic teaching: the doctrine of the Trinity, the doctrine of the Atonement, and the doctrine of the Church. These are issues that separate the two faiths. Islam postulates one God, who is sovereign and creedally undefined.**

**Islam relies solely on divine grace in the judgement, without any reference to atoning sacrifice. Finally, the relationship between humankind and God is direct, without any institution mediating that grace. From this point of view Islam is remarkably simple in theology, whereas Christianity is convoluted and complex, with manifold variations on the themes of Trinity, atonement, and authority.**

**The Creedal doctrines which are similar to Islamic doctrine are belief in the return of Jesus (AS), and the Day of Judgement.**

### **3. Extra-Creedal Developments**

Many Christian sects make a big issue of being non-creedal. In actuality, however, they have belief systems which are just as binding as the creeds. To be non-creedal does not mean that a sect has a different basis for its existence or its beliefs. It merely means that the formal recitation of its beliefs do not form a part of the liturgy. In fact, most of the sects actually conform to the belief systems of the creeds. They depart from them in two ways: either by additional beliefs, or by modification of one or

more of the creedal doctrines. The rejection of the creeds is therefore almost never total. It merely paves the way for modification or addition. The basic, Roman Catholic doctrine is generally the continuing foundation. For example, Baptists claim to be non-creedal, but almost invariably accept the filioque theology, which is Roman as opposed to Greek and Eastern. That is, to the extent which they have a clear idea of what they believe, they believe that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, and not from the Father alone.

### **3.1 European Antecedents**

In the history of the Reformation in Europe, and in addition to the national churches, there are two major tendencies of continuing consequence. These are the Unitarian movement, and the Radical Reformation. The early Unitarians, following such figures as Servetus, Socinius, Blandrata, and Francis David, attacked the doctrine of the Trinity in favor of some form of One God. At the same time, they tended to retain the other creedal issues, such as that of the Church. The Radical Reformation, with such figures as Von Carlstadt, Jan de Leyden, Andreas Fischer, and Hubmeier to mention only a few, attacked the doctrine of the Church above all, but contained elements which questioned other doctrines, although few of them went so far as to question all of the creedal doctrines.

These are the sources of the older Christian sects, such as Unitarians, Baptists, Mennonites, and Congregationalists of various types. Unless they have been influenced by liberalism, they retain a belief much influenced by the creeds, with modifications on the Trinity and the Church. Again, the doctrine of the Atonement was not an issue from which a strong movement of dissent arose. The belief that Jesus died for our sins, and without faith in that death salvation is impossible, remains central to the traditional forms of these sects. There have been trends approaching Islam in the rejection of the Christian doctrine that all people are born sinful, but questioning the atonement itself is rare. Only liberalism has been able to make inroad upon it, not contrasting religious faith.

There are two trends which acted upon the national churches of Protestantism, and are logical reactions to the emphasis on intellectual belief as the basis of religion. These are spirituality or mysticism on one hand, and holiness or piety on the other. Dry intellectualism is rarely satisfying to the human psyche, and many people are attracted to matters with a more emotional appeal. Furthermore, belief which does not have an effect on action is easily perceived as hypocrisy. No wonder many Protestants began to consider actions important. These two influences cut across all barriers in Protestantism, colouring all of the Protestant churches well as giving birth to new ones. Spirituality gave rise to ecstatic behaviour, such as speaking in tongues and popular singing, and sometimes even falling into trances and healing exercises.

This is the root of the diverse Pentecostal movement. The Pietistic Movement had a similar effect, breaking Lutheranism, for example, into sects advocating strict behaviour and strong conformity to customs perceived as being devout. Having been so cut off from the Decalogue, however, by creedalism, such movements have tended to descend into trivial customs of piety, such as hairstyles

and dress. The Methodist Church developed from a combination of both factors in Anglicanism. It has been able to incorporate both holiness and spirituality within the episcopal system and continue to use the creed in its liturgy.

This is the doctrinal backdrop from which sprout the thousands of Protestant and ultra-protestant sects. It is now necessary to focus on some of these, since they are vocal and fairly numerous in adherents throughout the world.

### **3.2 American Movements**

The new sects of Christianity which appeared in America in the 19th century and continue to be of extreme importance can be divided into the restoration sects and the chiliastic sects. The former took the Protestant reevaluation of the Church to new logical heights, claiming to restore the Church of Christ to its primitive purity. This of course was a prime aspect of the Reformation as a whole. The chiliastic sects saw themselves as the logical historical development of Christianity for the end of the world, and they preached various systems of beliefs concerning the second coming of Christ. The three most visible of such American sects today are the Mormons or The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints among the most popular of the restorationists, the Seventh-day Adventists and the Jehovah's Witnesses among the chiliasts.

These sects all appeared and developed about the time of Darwinism and the Industrial Revolution. They have a common foundation in literalism, pragmatism, and materialism. Their organization is basically corporate, like the organizations of the industrial and business world. These two factors have contributed to their dynamic success in the 20th century as compared to older, more traditional sects.

#### **3.2.1 The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints**

In the beginning, Mormonism did not strongly question the creedal doctrines other than the Church and its restoration. It accepted the main Christian doctrines. But over time, especially after the death of the founder Joseph Smith, the particular situation of the 19th century contributed to a growing departure from the creedal doctrines of Christianity, so that many Christians today would not consider Mormons Christians at all.

Despite its foundation on Christian doctrine, with only a restoration concept of the Church and a new Scripture containing little or nothing doctrinally new, the Mormons have departed from the Creedal faiths to a surprising extent. The doctrine of the Trinity is completely replaced by an evolutionary scheme. Much of the experience relates either to baptism for the dead or the necessary rites which will ensure the peculiar Mormon eschatology, which is divine evolution for all of those who participate in the necessary rites. Besides this there is an emphasis on clean living and family values, and the community of church activities.

Contact with Islam is facilitated by the prohibition of alcohol as well as an inclination at least formerly to

avoid flesh foods including pork, at least except in winter and in times of distress. A point of commonality is also in the former Mormon practice of polygamy, which has long been discontinued by the main body.

### **3.2.2 The Seventh-day Adventists**

Seventh-day Adventists represent precisely the opposite tendency as Mormonism. Although it began as a movement proclaiming the imminent and visible return of Christ, from the beginning it contained strong attacks on all three major creedal doctrines: the Trinity, the Atonement, and the Church. Many of the early Adventist leaders were unitarian, believing in one God, and that Jesus is subordinate. The sanctuary doctrine, the distinctive doctrine of Adventism and a very complex configuration of beliefs, in essence attacks the final atonement for sin made on the cross, which is the generally accepted evangelical Protestant belief. In the beginning, there was a strong anti-ecclesiastical tendency in Adventism.

By the beginning of the 1900s Adventism had essentially forsaken its anti-ecclesiasticalism. It became a Christian Church. Anti-trinitarian beliefs died harder, and there was even a widespread debate about the nature of Christ in the 1970s, after which the Trinitarian doctrine was fully ratified, making official a situation which had already been practically true for a long time. Only in the matter of Atonement does Adventism still represent a mild criticism of what is generally accepted among Christians. Adventism today can be said to represent Western Christianity with some additional peculiarities.

Adventist belief is set forth in an official document containing 27 articles. The first maintains the Bible as the only source of doctrine, an addition which identifies it as being a part of the Protestant Reformation. Catholic formulations would accept tradition as well as Scripture. Section 2 is entitled the Trinity, and sections 3–5 define the three persons. The Son is called the eternal Son of God, identifying Adventism as a branch of Calvinism, but this is not the whole story. The section on the Holy Spirit is clearly Roman Catholic, based on the filioque doctrine and opposed to Greek Orthodoxy. The Atonement is described with its ramifications up to section 10. This exposition accepts original sin, but denies the radical Calvinist total depravity. Sections 11–13 give a Protestant concept of the Church, accepting the spiritual universal Church. This has so far followed the creedal format.

The rest of the Adventist statement goes beyond the creedal format. However, it follows the typical format of Protestant confessions of faith. The two Protestant ordinances come next, baptism and the Lord's supper, going outside the matter of belief to that of practice. Sections 16 and 17 justify the Adventist distinctive of having their own prophet, Ellen White. Sections 18–22 show a pietistic trend, referring to the Decalogue as a model of behaviour. Section 23 inserts the Adventist distinctive, the sanctuary service which is seen as a necessary adjunct to Christ's death on the cross. Sections 24–27 present the second coming of Christ. Adventism maintains conditional immortality, which is a special and minority position on the creedal doctrine of resurrection of the body.

There are hundreds of Protestant sects that have similar statements in similar format. First of all come

the creedal doctrines, sometimes mixed with and followed by the typically Protestant doctrines, followed by the specific, distinctive doctrines of the sect. This structure is a very logical response to the feeling that the creeds are top-heavy as compared to the Decalogue in emphasizing the definition of God to the detriment of the second section. The additions to the statements of belief that go beyond the creeds are halting attempts to redress the imbalance which the creedal departures from the Decalogue represent. Rather than going back to the original, however, they are continued developments in the creedal tradition, tendencies toward solving the problem by additional definitions.

### **3.2.3 The Jehovah's Witnesses**

The Jehovah's Witnesses are a slippery breed. They produce a vast amount of literature, but not a brief summary of doctrine. Furthermore, their doctrine continues to change over time, so that old literature may not be an accurate expression of their faith.

Jehovah's Witnesses, as is typical of the radical reformation, question the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of the Church. They have replaced these with a doctrine which gives God a higher position than Jesus and denies the personality of the Holy Spirit. This is definitely a step towards Islam, although their concept of Jesus as divine of a lower order is still unacceptable, a fact they have been taught to conceal from their Muslim contacts. As for the Church, they have replaced this with the concept of a literal, physical kingdom of God, which is identical to the Jehovah's Witness organization.

There are several doctrines that seem to be fairly stable among Jehovah's Witnesses. The first is the importance of the name Jehovah or any variant of it from the tetragram or YHWH used in the Bible. Apparently God only responds to prayer addressed using this particular word as a specific name, the only valid one. In its radical manifestation, this doctrine considers prayer under any other formula to be idolatry. They also make an issue of Jesus not dying on a cross but on a stake. However, they do not deny the Atonement. They believe in a particular eschatology that includes the state of death to be an unconscious one, and the establishment of the earthly kingdom of Jesus (AS) upon his return.

Jehovah's Witnesses, like Mormons and Adventists, emphasize clean living and family values, but are surprising to Muslims in their openness to the use of alcohol. The character of the religion is intransigent, and the degree of conformity is high. Their liturgy consists to a great extent in reading books of questions and answers. There is no discussion, and their missionary activities use discussion only to the extent that they find necessary for contact. It is difficult to have a discussion with them in which both sides accept the criterion of reason. They tend to remain authoritarian even in the most open situations.

### **3.3 British Movements**

Among many British movements one might single out the Plymouth Brethren as the source of several groups with which Muslims are likely to come into contact. Darbyism as it may be called has since split into many groups. In the beginning there was some similarity with the new American religions, but in the

end British conservatism determined the nature of the movement. The main attack on the creedal doctrines was in the doctrine of the Church. Darbyism is extremely disestablishmentarian. It rejects forms and formula, but in the end has produced a proliferation of its own forms and dogmas, which tend to be conservative. A statement of beliefs cannot be obtained, but the beliefs presented by adherents are not complex or difficult to grasp, nor do they depart from traditional Christianity to the extent of the new American movements.

They retain a strongly critical attitude towards other groups, and it is precisely this stand against the Christian establishment that forms the largest common ground with Islam. Contact is usually not fruitful, however, as they too are generally more interested in getting their own teaching across than in an exchange in dialogue. People associated with the movement sometimes do street witnessing in British cities, and this is the primary means of contact with Muslims.

**The extra-creedal doctrines are areas of opportunity for Islam. In that some of them question and reverse the three central Christian doctrines of the Trinity, Atonement, and the Church, parallels can be made which approach Islam. This is especially true for the unity of God (which many Christians will accept) and the reduction of ecclesiastical authority. The crucifixion generally remains problematic. Furthermore, various sects add doctrines that are similar to Islam, even when they retain the Creedal errors. Thus one finds here and there prohibitions of alcohol or unclean flesh, for example, as among Adventists and Mormons. All of these provide common areas of belief upon which to build a relationship of trustful communication.**

**On the other hand, some of the extra-creedal doctrines, such as the Mormon doctrine of the evolution of God, raise even higher barriers than the creeds themselves. Such issues can be best met if one is provided with a statement of beliefs that can be evaluated. This is not always possible, in which case it is necessary to get the Christian to express his beliefs clearly and accurately.**

## **4. The Decalogue and Islamic Belief**

Islamic doctrine is also a response to the development of the Christian creeds. The history of the Christian creeds shows them to be very practical in origin. They often say what people feel needs to be said at a particular time, and are only afterward perceived as absolute expressions of truth. The two versions of the Athanasian Creed above show that very well, where the first is particular and polemic and the second universal and liturgical.

The structure of Matthew six reflects the local preoccupations of the time by giving alms, prayer, fasting, and probably pilgrimage as the basics of the religion of Jesus. Although this does not replace or conflict with the Decalogue, it does reveal a shift in issues. This shift in issues is valid for a vital faith, because it addresses the practical life of the people. When this shift in issues begins to conflict with the Decalogue, however, then we are faced with a new and different faith, which is the case with the Christian creeds.

In the beginning the Christian creeds reflected the burning issue of what to do with Jesus. As this shift in interest away from the Decalogue continued, the Decalogue as a source of doctrine was forgotten and the creeds began to define Jesus in terms that were in literal conflict with the Decalogue, while preserving the essential structure of that document. The structure of the Decalogue which is the proclamation of God followed by a list of logically implied commands, beliefs, and values, is evident from the Mosaic document down through Islam, the Christian creeds, and finally to the latest versions of sectarian Christian statements of beliefs.

The Decalogue, as the name implies, has traditionally been seen to exist in ten sections, although there is some variation in how these sections are divided. Interestingly enough, the Islamic statement of the essentials of faith and practice preserves this structure of ten. The Islamic presentation is in two sections also, the roots and the branches. The roots or fundamentals of faith are five: the Unity of God, Divine Justice, Apostleship, Divine Guidance, and the Day of Judgement. The branches are ten: prayer in prostration, the month of fasting, pilgrimage, zakat and khums (the two forms of charity), holy endeavour, enjoining good, preventing evil, love of the godly, and avoidance of the wicked.

It is quite clear that these two groups correspond to the two sections of the Decalogue, and that the latter group, the branches of faith, corresponds rather precisely to the exposition of issues in Jesus' (AS) presentation in Matthew six. Islamic belief, like Christian, is the product of taking the Decalogue as a point of departure and defining faith in terms of contemporary issues. The difference is that Islam does not conflict with the document of origin, but rather adds to it in ways both consistent with the original and relevant to new problems.

This is seen in the way the roots are expressed. The first principle is divine unity, corresponding to the first commandment of the Decalogue. There are four principles that are logically drawn from divine unity. If God is One, He is thereby impartial and if impartial, then intrinsically just. Since He is just, he reveals the basis for His judgement of humans, firstly in verbal revelation through the prophets, and secondly through the practical application of divine guidance. This implies finally human responsibility before God in a judgement. All of these are logically implicit in the unity of God.

The consistent development of Islamic doctrine is also seen in the way the branches are portrayed. The second commandment prohibits prostration to false gods. The implication is prostration to the One True God alone. It is at this point where the defining of the branches of faith begins. The other nine branches of faith are similarly logical sequences from the practice of prayer in prostration. There is thus nothing inconsistent with the Decalogue. Islam is shown to be a consistent transmission of the most ancient revelation, applied to new situations with the shift in issues.

## **5. Theology Christian and Islamic: an evaluation.**

Among the more important divisions of theology from a Christian standpoint of belief are theology proper or the doctrine of God, soteriology or the doctrine of salvation, ecclesiology or the doctrine of the Church,

and eschatology or the doctrine of last things. We have noted that in terms of eschatology, the differences between Christianity and Islam are small. We have also seen that throughout its history, Christianity has been able to discuss and re-evaluate its thought in regard to the Church and in regard to God, producing a number of mutually exclusive and conflicting alternatives, some of which approach Islam. It is the doctrine of salvation where the lines are drawn most clearly and abruptly between the two faiths. Christianity does not budge an inch on the belief that Jesus died on the cross and that this death was necessary in order for God to forgive sin. Thus a doctrinal path of dialogue can be envisioned, beginning with what is common and ending with what is most divisive.

A discussion with Christians on the matter of end time events, signs of the return of Christ, and the importance of the Day of Judgement is a good opening. If some amount of agreement can be found in those areas, it establishes a point of contact and readiness to discuss more difficult issues.

The second most fruitful area of discussion is that of the Church. Especially evangelical Christians will respond favourably to the Islamic idea of direct responsibility before God, without the vehicle of a priestly, ecclesiastical function. In this matter Islam and evangelical Christianity have similar beliefs, in contrast to the more authoritarian forms of Christianity. In contact with Catholics, the point of commonality is the similarity between the authority of the Pope and that of the Imam in Shi'ite practice.

In the matter of the Trinity, Christians are historically accustomed to making this issue complex and mysterious on one hand, and absolutely essential to faith on the other. The prevailing Christian attitude, historically speaking, is that one's destiny depends on having God defined properly. Muslims have traditionally clung to the unity of God, which essentially implies refusal to define God and recognition that God, being sovereign, is not definable in human terms. In some cases it is possible to cut out the interminable discussions with Christians on the Trinity by referring to the unity of God as an absolute, as the recognition of the ineffable character of God.

If discussion of the Trinity occurs, several things will become soon apparent. Firstly, the Muslim has the upper hand in terms of both logic and in terms of Scripture. The Christian Scriptures fail to provide a secure basis for the doctrine of the Trinity, whereas a good foundation for the unity of God can be made on the basis of the Bible. Secondly, in the face of reason and Scripture, the Christian will fall back on tradition, the creed, or ecclesiastical authority, covered by desperate quibbling on Scriptural interpretation. Either a Christian will be easy or nearly impossible to convince on the matter of the unity of God. There is no middle ground.

Nevertheless, theological formulation on the doctrine of God has a common foundation in Islam and Christianity, one largely based on Greek philosophy. The Western formulation is still greatly dependent on Thomas Aquinas, whose theology owes much to Al-Ghazali and others. There is a clear correspondence between the divine attributes taught in Christian theology, and those taught in Islam. All agree on the acceptance of negative and positive attributes. The positive attributes in Shi'ite thought are 1) Eternity, 2) Omnipotence, 3) Omniscience, 4) All-Perception, 5) Self-existence, 6) Absolute

Independence of will and action, 7) Creation of Speech, 8) Absolute Truthfulness. The negative attributes are rejection of 1) compounding, 2) accommodation, 3) incarnation, 4) visibility, 5) need, 6) association, 7) change, and 8) addition of qualities. Sunnism seems to reject only the last of these.

Classical Western theology appeals to many of the same attributes on the same basis. Only the seventh positive attribute is generally unknown to Christians. All of the others are not only acceptable, but more or less normative, especially the first three. Among the negative attributes the fourth and seventh, visibility and change, are most commonly admitted. This situation is logically inconsistent with the Trinity. The influence of Al-Ghazali and other Islamic scholars on Christian theology has been so extensive, that Christian theological formulation nearly always includes vast areas of mixing incompatible motifs, Islamic and Trinitarian, without achieving a rational synthesis. One need only ask how is it possible to maintain the negative attributes of visibility and change, and yet admit incarnation, which effects not only change in the deity, but makes the deity visible, at least in first century Palestine. Christian doctrine is at its most vulnerable precisely in its most sophisticated formulations. Unfortunately, most Christians do not have the resources for discussing matters on that level. On the other hand, if the Muslim makes an issue of the unity of God to be a refusal to engage in theological definition of God, the Christian may turn the argument against Islam by noting that Greek-based theological formulation also exists in Islam, in its acceptance of positive and negative attributes of God.

The matter of soteriology, the doctrine of salvation, is even more difficult. Although there is a variety of thought on why Jesus had to die, and on how his death makes forgiveness for sin possible, there is little desire among Christians to question the Atonement as such. Among the classical ideas are that the death of Christ was redemptive, that is, it bought the sinful human being from Satan, who was the lawful master because of sin, and that sin requires the death sentence in order to satisfy the justice of God, and that Christ's death is the substitute for everyone who claims it before God. A more modern thought is that human beings are incapable of accepting forgiveness until they realize the love of God in providing His Son as a sacrifice for them. Needless to say, many Christians find these justifications lacking, without thereby rejecting the doctrine of Atonement.

It is therefore of little use for the Muslim to point out the weakness of these classical justifications for the doctrine. The real difference between Islam and Christianity on this matter is a difference in the understanding of what sin is. For the Christian generally, sin is a cosmic evil in the world into which every human is born, and which can be overcome only through a cosmic event which does battle with that evil and overcomes it. The death of Christ is the highpoint of that battle. For the Muslim, sin is failure to obey a divine command. It needs only to be reversed and put right insofar as possible, to be atoned by repentance and good faith shown in good deeds, and finally forgiven simply by divine grace.

The general Islamic approach to Atonement is just as intransigent as the Christian doctrine itself. It generally consists in the outright denial of the death of Jesus. This of course puts an end to the discussion. However, what must be maintained in Islam is that the death of Jesus (or anyone else) can

have no objective influence on God's ability or will to forgive sins. For Shi'ites, to admit the possibility of the death of Jesus merely opens the possibility of seeing it in much the same light as the death of Imam Husseyn (AS). There is no possibility of discussion between Muslims and Christians on this issue without compromise on one side or the other. Evangelical Christians, however, are left speechless when confronted with the Islamic statement that God forgives by His infinite grace alone, to which no human sacrifice can add anything.

## 6. Tying the Knot

The areas of contrast between Christian and Islamic belief can be charted simply as follows.

| Christianity                        | Islam                                   |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| One God in Three Persons            | One God alone                           |
| Forgiveness through human sacrifice | Forgiveness by infinite divine grace    |
| The Church the only way to God      | Direct access to God for every believer |

Although Christians will balk at the thought that the death of Jesus on the cross in Christian teaching is essentially a human sacrifice, and some will deny the authority of the Church, this simple caricature of the differences between Christianity and Islam should make the Christian stop and think. It may well be that worship of one God alone, and the realization that he has direct access to God without recourse to any institutions, and free forgiveness of sin through the infinite grace of God, is what he really always thought was true and right. After all, all are born Muslim.

**Image:**

| Christianity                        | Islam                                   |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| One God in Three Persons            | One God alone                           |
| Forgiveness through human sacrifice | Forgiveness by infinite divine grace    |
| The Church the only way to God      | Direct access to God for every believer |

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