

Creation, Free Will, Adam, Sin

Creation, Free Will, Adam, Sin - Christian Perspective

"Creation" in Christian theology refers both to the creation of the universe, and to the creation of humanity. Both are thought to be created by God. The creation account in Genesis 1-2 states that it was God who created the "heavens and the earth" i.e. the universe. "In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void, and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the waters." (Genesis 1:1-2). Then God said "Let there be light, and there was light."

Though the text says that "the earth was a formless void, and darkness covered the face of the deep," traditional Christian (and Jewish) interpretation has been that God created the world out of nothing--there was no preexistent matter, which constrained God's creation. Thus God is sovereign in the act of creating; no other power limits God's creation. As a consequence, all of creation is "good. The text of Genesis 1 says after each day of creation: "And God saw that it was good." Jewish and Christian theology has held that the creation is good, that it reflects God, and that it is a gift from God.

Some Christians read the six day story of creation in Genesis as literal history. However, there are problems with this. The cosmos, as described by Genesis, is that of a dome (firmament) which separates the upper waters from the waters under the earth. This does not correspond with our present scientific picture of the earth at all; rockets heading into space do not go through the firmament and enter waters which are above the heavens. Furthermore, there are other scientific difficulties: for example, according to Genesis 1, the plants were created before the sun, while the animals were created before humanity in Genesis 1: 24, and after humanity in Genesis 2:18. For these reason and others, mainline Catholics and mainline Protestants do not attempt to read Genesis 1-2 as an accurate scientific and historical account of earth's history. Rather it is a theological account, which tells us spiritual and theological truth about who created the universe and the earth (God), not how it was created. The present scientific account of the origin of the universe is the Big Bang theory, which holds that all matter/energy emerged in a colossal explosion some 14 billion years ago. As the energy expanded, it condensed into atoms of hydrogen and helium, which in turn coalesced to form the first stars. In the interior of the stars were formed the elements, and from the elements, billions of year later, were formed planets. On one planet, at least, living beings emerged. Now the scientific account of the Big Bang does NOT explain where the initial energy came from; the Big Bang therefore is perfectly compatible with the Christian doctrine that the universe was created by God from nothing.

Again, the Genesis account tells of the creation of an original human pair. There are actually two creation accounts, one in Genesis 1, and the other in Genesis 2. Both, however, affirm that it was God who created human beings; Genesis 1 says that human beings were created "in the image of God." (Genesis 1:27). Traditionally, this was understood to mean that human beings were created with reason and free will. Modern

interpreters note that it is humankind that is created in God's image, not either the man or the woman alone. Being in God's image, then, means being in a relationship with other humans and with God. Finally, in Genesis 1:28 God blesses the humans and says: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." Modern commentators emphasize that this dominion is meant to be one of stewardship and trusteeship of the earth. This is reinforced by the story in Genesis 2, where God puts the man "in the garden of Eden to till it and to keep it.

Contemporary biology explains the origin of humanity as due to a gradual evolution from primate ancestors, probably in Africa. In this account, humanity develops by degrees; there is no clear point in the evolutionary process where there is a human child and a non-human mother, nor where there is a first human, Adam, who had no parents.

Many Christians reject the evolutionary account of human origins, and instead believe that God created a first human pair with no parents. But it is possible to accept the evolutionary account of human origins, with the proviso that it is God who creates the soul, and that it is the union of the soul and the body which makes us fully human. Thus Pope John Paul II has written: "if the origin of the human body comes through living matter which existed previously, the spiritual soul is created directly by God. It is this fact which makes each human person a child of God.

The pope also makes the point that each human being is created in relationship with God-"man is called to enter into a loving relationship with God himself, a relationship which will find its full expression at the end of time, in eternity" (Message to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences: On Evolution-22 Oct, 1996).

In the Genesis account, human beings are first created in a state of harmonious relationship with God, animals, nature, and each other. This is symbolized in the story of the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2-3). But the human beings disobey God, and this first act of disobedience leads to a rupture of the harmonious relationship with God, with one another, and even with nature. This is the first 'sin', though this word is not used until Genesis 4 (the story of Cain and Abel). Because of this act, in the Genesis account, human beings are cast out of Eden, that is, out of the full presence of God.

There are many interpretations among Jews and Christians of the story of the Garden of Eden and the first 'sin' in Genesis. Many Christians read it as a literal account. Other read it as a symbolic account, which is meant to explain the source of humanity's alienation from God. The point of the story is that this alienation was not caused by God, but by a human act of turning away from God. And the result of this "original sin" as it came to be called, is that each human being grows up partially alienated from God. Our will, desires, and emotions are turned away from God, even as children, and we have to turn back to God, with the help of God's grace. Simply put, the doctrine of original sin means that each human being is born into the world with an inherently selfish nature, and has to learn to love others and to love God. In Christian theology, this coming back to the love of God and others is due to the God's gift of love, which human beings can embrace or refuse.

Original sin is a uniquely Christian doctrine. It differs from personal sin, which is freely chosen. In Christian thinking, original sin is a condition into which human beings are born—a condition of selfishness. The point of Christ's death on the cross, and the gift of God's grace, is, for Christians, to bring fallen humanity out of the condition of sin into God's love. But this takes teaching, discipline, and surrender to God, through Jesus Christ. Neither Judaism nor Islam has a doctrine of original sin; in these religions, sin is personal and freely chosen. Each person is therefore responsible only for his or her own sin.

Dr Terence Nichols

Creation, Adam, Free, Will and Sin - Muslim Perspective

The Qur'anic narrative on the creation of Adam and Eve^[1], the commission of the "error" or "sin" on their part and acceptance of their repentance, the overarching attribute of absolute justice of God and the concept of recompense on the Day of Judgment are all indicative of the Qur'anic position that human beings are free agents and are possessors of free-will and volition.^[2] They are both praised and condemned in the Qur'an due to their potential of rising to the heights of excellence that would surpass the angels and, at the same time, they are equally capable of descending to a level below the beasts if oblivious to their moral/ethical responsibilities.^[3]

In the Qur'an, God introduces human beings to the angels as his vice-regents and deputies (*khalifah*) on earth: "And when your Lord said to the angels, 'I am about to designate a vice-regent on earth' (Q. 2:30). The angels remonstrate and object to the designation of vice-regent for the humans and argue that they are more worthy of this exalted status than the human beings on account of their sanctification and glorification of God. They were not in favor of the creation of humankind because the latter will have proclivity towards the shedding of blood and working of corruption on the earth. To this objection, God responds: "I know what you do not know" (Q. 2:30).

Human beings have been endowed with certain characteristics that entitle them, according to majority opinion, to a superior status than the angels. This is confirmed with the divine instruction to the angels to prostrate in front of Adam as a sign of their deference to humanity. The exalted status of human beings is once again exhibited by the acceptance of the divine trust (*amanah*)^[4] while the heavens, the earth and the mountains decline the offer due to the onerous responsibilities associated to being the trustee of God. As a consequence, humans are both representatives and trustees of God on the earth, and have been entrusted to actualize divine mission by creating conducive circumstances on the earth for humanity to worship God and establish a just public order.

According to the Qur'an, humans are composed of two contradictory elements: divine spirit^[5] and mud or clay.^[6] The divine breath and the primordial nature (*fitrah*) generate motivation towards that which is lofty and sublime. The second ingredient, the mud, tends the humans towards lowliness and unbridled fulfillment of base desires. The knowledge

of good and evil has been transmitted to the humans by way of "revealed books" in the form of prophets, scriptures, primordial nature (*fitrah*)^[7] and the book of nature which points towards the existence of God who is worthy of adoration, worship and submission.^[8] The freedom of choice that is enjoyed by humans elevates their status in relation to the angels. Accordingly, nobility is contingent upon the bestowal of free-will and knowledge, and not on natural and racial characteristics. If the latter was the criteria, then the angels could justifiably claim superiority since they were created from the higher material of light in contrast to mud.

Possession of free-will creates responsibility and accountability. This is demonstrated in the first violation by Adam and Eve who ate from the forbidden tree at the prompting of Satan.^[9] This infraction results in the expulsion of both of them from the garden to the earth. However, it is argued, that this was a pre-determined error because Adam and Eve were created to live on the earth from the outset, as attested at the time of their creation: "I am about to designate a vice-regent on earth" (Q. 2:30). In any event, both of them sought God's forgiveness for this error of judgment and were forgiven: "Adam received words from his Lord and He forgave him... (Q. 2:37). Thus, there is no transmission of "original error" or "sin" to their posterity. Great importance is paid to this incident in both Sunni and Shi'i theology with the aim to preserve the infallibility of the prophets and to insulate them from the commission of sins, especially major sins (*kaba'ir*).

The Qur'an is cognizant that humans have been created with inclination towards virtue and vice, and inevitably they will fall prey to satanic temptations and, as a result, commit sins. However, all sins can be forgiven ^[10], including the greatest sin of polytheism (*shirk*) ^[11], provided the person sincerely seeks forgiveness, renounces the evil act, regenerates virtuous desires and intentions, and provides restitution to the wronged party.

In the Qur'an, faith and good deeds are inextricably connected. Possession of sound belief must necessarily result in the performance of virtuous acts by the exercise of one's own free-will. One of the major points of contention between the Mu'tazili and the Ash'ari school of theology was whether human actions are pre-determined or the outcome of human agency. The former were proponents of free-will and argued their case on the basis of the attribute of divine justice. This constituted a decisive break from the conception of fatalism that was prevalent in pre-Islamic Arabia. In contrast, the Ash'aris emphasized the divine attributes of power, omnipotence and omniscience to assert that human acts have been divinely decreed and there is no possibility of altering that destiny. Later developments in Sunni Muslim thought produced a compromise whereby God's created actions are acquired (*kasb*) by humans and, accordingly, they are morally accountable on the Day of Judgment. The Twelver Shi'is adopted a middle position based on a statement attributed to their sixth divine saint, Ja'far al-Sadiq: "There is no absolute coercion or absolute human free-will. In actuality, the case is between these two [extremes] (*al-amr bayn al-amrayn*).

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Points of Agreement:

Muslims and Christians agree that human beings were created by God, and that humanity was created to be a steward, trustee or custodian of the creation. They agree also that human beings were endowed with reason and free choice by God. This means that human beings will be held accountable by God in a judgment at the end of time. Both Muslims and Christians agree that human beings will be resurrected, judged, and will end in either heaven or hell in the afterlife. Again they agree that human beings have a status superior to the angels.

Traditional Christians agree with Muslims that the human race originated with a first human pair--Adam and his wife. Some contemporary Christians may disagree with this traditional teaching, and follow the opinion of evolutionary scientists that the human race emerged gradually through a process of evolution, and that there was no original human pair.

Points of Disagreement:

One of the major disagreements concern original sin. Muslims do not agree that the sin of our first parents had consequences for all their descendants. Rather, Muslims believe that each human being is born without sin, in a pure state (see the article on "Humanity" by Dr. Ozdemir). Human alienation from God is explained in Islam as due to "forgetfulness," and also as *shirk* (idolatry) and unrighteousness, or personal sin (as distinguished from original sin).

Points for further discussion:

Many contemporary Christians have doubts about original sin, especially in its strong form (proposed, for example, by St. Augustine). The Islamic idea that alienation from God is due to forgetfulness is an interesting alternative explanation for the alienation of human beings from God. Part of the meaning of original sin is that the mind is darkened as a consequence of sin, so that people do not see God and God's will clearly. In other words, they are forgetful. Thus the Islamic doctrine of 'forgetfulness' may in fact complement part of the Christian idea of original sin. Certainly there are differences between the two teachings but there may be some similarity also. This could be explored in further discussion.

[1] Created from one soul, Qur'an, 4:1.

[2] Qur'an, 2:256

[3] Qur'an, 17:70, 13:28/33:72, 22:66, 96.7, 17:11.

[4] Qur'an, 33:72

[5] Qur'an, 32:7

[6] Qur'an, 3:59 and 7:12

[7] Qur'an, 91:8-9

[8] Qur'an, 10:6-7

[9].Qur'an, 7:20-22, 20:121.

[10] Qur'an, 39:53 and 4:31.

[11] Qur'an, 4:48