

God

Allah

by Dr. Adil Ozdemir

Muslims believe in God. God is the ultimate Truth (al Haqq) and the supreme reality. God is the cause of all that exists and the ultimate meaning and purpose of all creation. God's Unity (*tawhid*) is the essence of Islamic revelation given to Muhammad ("Say: God is one. He needs none. He neither begets nor is begotten. None is equal to Him" - 112/1-4). God is Omnipresent, Omniscient, Omnipotent, eternal, self-existing, and infinite. Non-existence for God is unthinkable. But God is also personal: creating, sustaining, caring, loving, hearing, seeing, guiding, helping and preserving. God's mercy encompasses the heavens and the earth (2/255). All other beings were/are created by God and are therefore mortal and "contingent," or dependent on God for their existence. God is above all categories, images, and predications, which tend to be anthropomorphic in nature.

Muslim belief in One God with no partners, associates, equals or aides is grounded in the Qur'an, which was miraculously revealed to Muhammad by God through the angel Gabriel. Muhammad himself believed in the Qur'an as the divine word of God and the master truth, as do Muslims who follow him. Muslims put faith in the Qur'an as explaining not only God's existence and unity but also His will for humankind.

Although there are other names used for God, such as Chalaab, Tangri, Ilah, Mewla in old Turkish, and Huda, Yazdan in Persian, Allah is considered the proper name for God and is the one most commonly used in all Islamic languages. Even Jews and Christians who live in Muslim countries use Allah for God. However, the Qur'an also uses other names for God, such as *Rahman* (commonly translated into English as the Compassionate) and *Rahim* (translated as the Merciful). Both *Rahman* and *Rahim* appear in the *Bismillah*, the word of blessing that stands at the head of all except one chapter in the Qur'an. Both *Rahman* and *Rahim* are derivatives of the same Arabic root of (*r h m*), meaning "womb," which is the symbol for life, love and care.

Trusting God wholeheartedly and putting faith solely in Him in infinite gratitude and humility is the foundation of the Muslim faith. Denial of the truth of God, or distorting it, is called unbelief or faithlessness (*kufr*), or insincerity (*nifaaq*). Assigning other gods beside Allah (or *shirk*, which literally means association, taking partner) is considered the greatest sin, unforgivable by God. God cannot forgive being ascribed partners, although all other sins He can forgive should He so will.

A necessary corollary to faith in God is the attitude of surrender (*Islam*), which is used interchangeably with faith (*iman*) in the Qur'an. God in the Qur'an is not an abstract reality to be known and talked about on an intellectual level, but rather is a living reality in constant relationship with creation. God calls and responds to creation, and asks to be called to and responded to in turn (We are closer to him than our jugular vein 50/16). All

creation is in constant surrender to God, except for humans, who have the free will to submit or not on their own account (76/3; 90/10; 74/38; 41/46).

The Qur'an teaches that God is a reality obvious to human heart and mind (We will show you our signs in your selves and in the horizons - 41/53. Nature is a sign to the majesty and wonderful handiwork of God - 59/20). According to the Qur'an, finding God is not only natural and reasonable but also experiential. Reflecting on and experiencing God's signs, creation, and the human self/soul lead to God (3/191,7/186,10/24,13/3,16/11,44,69;30/8,39/42;45/13;59/21).

Attributes of God:

In the Qur'an God talks about Himself in adjectives or divine predicates which are known in Islamic theology as the attributes of God. These attributes are known to Muslims as the ninety-nine most beautiful names or perfections (*al Asmaa al Husnaa*). In their devotions and rosaries Muslims of all orientations call on and praise God with these holy names or attributes. These attributive names are used in the Qur'an by God himself. Using anthropomorphic language about the nature of God with any terms other than those given in the Qur'an is discouraged.

Muslim theologians hold the view that it is possible to talk about God with negative statements, such as: God has no beginning, no ending, no form or image. He is free from time and space. They also maintain that we can talk about God in positive statements, such as: God is eternal, holy, majestic, knowing, good, beautiful, compassionate, merciful, and loving.

Although the perfections of God are presented in the Qur'an as an organic unity, the transcendence of God (*tanzih*) is given special urgency and primacy. Just as the unity of God is central, so His transcendence appears as an all-inclusive reality. Imaging God in any form, likening Him to any of His creatures, or raising any of the creatures to the level of God is rejected as blasphemous (*shirk*). Every attribute of God or any predicate of Him is understood transcendentally. God is just but we cannot know the nature of this justice. It is divine and infinite in character. God is good but we can not define His goodness. Muslim theologians have concluded that it is more in the spirit of the Qur'an to remember our humanness and refrain from using absolute speech in the name of God.

Muslim theologians have debated as to whether the attributes of God are separable from the essence of God. The Mu'tazila school went to argued that attributes are one with God and are inseparable from God's essence/person. God's knowledge is an attribute of God and therefore is one with God and inseparable from His essence. But the Qur'an that was revealed to Muhammad is a creation in time and therefore can be reproduced by human beings. Other Muslim scholars (the al Salaf) argued that the Qur'an is the uncreated word of God from eternity. It is as both words and meaning eternal and inseparably coexisting with God. It is divine and yet separable from the essence of God, therefore inseparable from His person. Thus the theological debate in the formative period of Muslim theology centered about around the issue of whether the God's attributes are the same as God's

essence or are whether they are separable from it. Muslim orthodoxy concluded that the attributes are neither the same nor are different from the essence. They reached a synthesis maintaining that the Qur'an as a manifestation of God's eternal knowledge is uncreated in spirit and meaning but is created in voice, ink and letters. Muslims therefore worship Allah through the Qur'an as God's word but they do not worship the Qur'an.

In the Qur'anic revelation, God is the same God of all humanity (1/1) just as the revelation is essentially the same revelation since the beginning of creation (2/136;3/84;4/163;2/136). Thus the Qur'an honors all the prophets, whose number is known only to God. At the head of the prophets are Abraham, Moses and Jesus, who are predecessors of Muhammad. Muhammad himself is seen as the culmination of the prophets (33/40) with the ideal religion and grace given to him by God (5/3). Thus the Islamic revelation of God is not considered a new revelation but rather a reaffirmation and consolidation of Abraham's religion of monotheism and submission.

According to the Qur'an, God does not reveal Himself by coming in person, because the world cannot contain God in person. Vision of God with physical eyes is impossible in this world, as is talking with God. Moses insisted on seeing God but could not stand to see Him (7/143). Instead, humans can behold God only if God reveals His words to their hearts. Most Muslims believe they will see God in the life to come with eyes other than the present eyes.

This brings us to the Muslim concept of God in distinction from the Christian concept of God. Orthodox Christian theology presents God as a triune God in three distinct persons. The Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit are of the same essence but are distinct divine aspects. Thus the Trinitarian unity and particularly the Sonship of Jesus have been definitive to Christian theology. The incarnation of God as the only-begotten Son who came down to earth to save and reconcile sinners to God is the particular and definitive revelation for Christianity.

Putting aside the anthropomorphic language for God as father, Muslims and Christians share common ground in their belief in God in all His attributes. The two religions also share belief in Jesus as a great prophet, although a major difference between the two is Christianity's further understanding of Jesus as the Son of God and second member of the Holy Trinity. The Qur'an does not accept Christological, incarnational and soteriological language for Jesus because it views this language as contrary to its teaching of unity and justice. The Qur'an claims such language is limiting, exclusive, divisive, and contrary to the principle of personal accountability.

God: A Christian View

Dr. Terence Nichols

In Christian thought, God is the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, as well as its ultimate purpose. According to traditional Christian (and Muslim) doctrine, God created

the universe from nothing. Therefore God is not limited by any other power, or even by matter—God’s act of creating is completely sovereign.

It follows that as the creator and sustainer of the space-time universe, God is not limited by space and time. God is not material, nor finite, and is not a being or entity which exists in our world. God is not a deity whom we can picture physically, like the Greek and Roman or Hindu deities, who were conceived of as having superhuman powers, but who were limited by fate and by each other. Finally, God is not contingent. “Contingent” means that something might exist or might not—it does not exist necessarily, and is not the cause of its own existence. All creatures are contingent, as are angels, who were created by God, and who could have not been created. But this is not true of God. As strange as it might sound, in Christian (and Muslim) thought God is not caused by any cause outside God’s self. Put another way, God cannot not exist. In the language of Thomas Aquinas, God’s essence is to exist. Every created being is brought into existence by a cause outside itself. But not God, who is not created; God is uncaused Being.

The above statements about God are largely negative statements: God is not limited, not material, not finite, etc. This is one theological way of talking about God. But negative statements about God fail to convey essential aspects of God: God is personal and responds to prayer, God is good, God is love. Jesus prayed to God, addressed God as “Father,” and encouraged his followers to trust God as they would a loving parent. Christian theologians therefore hold that it is possible to make positive statements about God, like “God is love” (1 John 4:8). But how is this possible? For if God is infinite, has no cause, and sustains the universe, how can we say anything positive about God without *limiting* God? The traditional answer is that positive terms applied to God are used *analogously*. In saying that God is love, we must imagine that all the limiting qualities of human love are taken away, and the positive qualities expanded infinitely, and then applied to God. This gives us some faint idea of what it means to say that God is love. God cares for each of us personally, as a loving parent would, but God’s love is not limited as a parent’s love is. Analogies differ from metaphors in that an analogical statement is literally true of God. It is literally true to say that God is love, or that God is personal, wise, beautiful, and so on--these are analogies. But metaphorical statements--like “God is a rock” (a frequent metaphor in the psalms) -- are not literally true about God. God is like a rock--that is, steadfast, enduring, etc., but cannot be literally said to be a rock. Both analogical and metaphorical terms can be applied to God, though metaphors are probably more common in the bible, and analogies more common in theology.

Another way to speak of God is through the use of paradoxical or complementary language, in which complementary and seemingly opposite terms are applied to God (as in the writings of St. Paul, Augustine, and Luther). So, for example, God is said to be just but also merciful, loving but also wrathful, personal but also more-than-personal. A classic example is the terms ‘transcendent’ and ‘immanent.’ God transcends or goes beyond our world of space and time, our human knowledge, even our concepts of causality and science. But this does not mean that God is remote from us. Though God is transcendent, God is also immanent, that is, within the world, within our hearts, close to us. In fact as the sustainer of all that exists, God is closer to us than we are to ourselves. Aquinas writes

that God is what is innermost in every being. So God transcends the world, infinitely, but is also present and within it, holding every atom as well as all space and time in being every moment.

How can we know about God? In several ways. God reveals traces of Godself in the beauty and intricacy of the created universe. God also speaks to each person through that person's conscience. And, according to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, God has spoken to human beings through prophets, such as Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, and Amos. Christians and Muslims (but not Jews) accept Jesus as a prophet, and Muslims hold that Muhammad was a prophet.

Prophets reveal not only God's nature but also God's will—what God wants human beings to be and do. For example, through the prophet Moses, God revealed the ten commandments, which are expressions of God's will--what God wishes human beings to do. In the New Testament, God's will is expressed in the Sermon on the mount (Matthew chapters 5-7), and is summed up by Jesus in the two great commandments: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" and "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Both Christians and Muslims believe that God calls each person to obey God's will in this life and the next. Further, God will hold each person accountable for his or her actions, and will judge each person on the last day (Matthew 25: 31-46).

Perhaps the most difficult Christian language about God occurs in the doctrine of the trinity. Both Christians and Muslims hold that God is one. But Christians also hold that God is triune—God exists in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This doctrine of the Trinity is what distinguishes Christianity from both Judaism and Islam (and all other monotheistic religions, such as Bahai). Even Christians wonder: How can God be both one and three? One what? Three what? How did such a teaching originate?

Christians were led to the doctrine of the trinity because of their belief that Jesus was the incarnation (i.e. enfleshment) of the Word of God (*Logos*), who was one with God: "In the beginning was the Word (Gk:*Logos*), and the word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). But Jesus also prayed to God as "Father". And God addressed Jesus as

'Son': "You are my Son, the Beloved..." (Mark 1:11) How then could Jesus be both one with God, and yet other than God? And how was the Holy Spirit related to God and Jesus?

We find early attempts to answer these questions in the New Testament. Paul, in Romans 8:9 speaks of the "Spirit of God" and the "Spirit of Christ" in the same sentence, as if they were the same Spirit. The risen Jesus commands the disciples to baptize all nations "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). Jesus says "...I am in the Father and the Father is in me" (John 14:10). In early baptismal creeds (c. 200 c.e.), new believers were baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. But controversy still arose as to how Jesus, the Son, the incarnation of

the *Logos*, was related to the Father. In about 300 c.e. Arius, a priest in Alexandria, Egypt, proposed that the *Logos* who was incarnate in Jesus was not really God. The *Logos*, according to Arius, was a creature, created by God, but not God. Arius gathered a large following--the Arians. Their slogan was "There was a time when he [the Son] was not." In other words, the Son did not exist with God from the beginning, and hence was not divine. The Son, and hence Jesus, the incarnation of the Son, was made in time, the first born of creation, but still a creature. In response to this, the emperor Constantine assembled a great council of bishops at Nicaea (325 c.e.) to settle the question: Was Arius' teaching Christian? The council decided it was not, and issued a creed (The Nicene Creed), stating that Jesus, the Son, was of one substance (*homoousios*) or one being with the Father. Later, the Council of Constantinople added a clause about the Holy Spirit to the Nicene creed, stating that the Holy Spirit "proceeds from the Father, and together with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified." In other words, Jesus is one in being with God, and so is the Spirit.

The theology explaining this was worked out by theologians such as Gregory Naziansus and by St. Augustine in the fifth century. The Son (or the *Logos*) is begotten by the Father, not made (what is begotten shares the same nature, as a son from a father; what is made does not, as an artifact made by a person). The Son is the perfect image of the Father. The Spirit proceeds from the Father (Eastern Nicene Creed) or from the Father and the Son (Western Creed). All three, the Father, Son and Spirit, share the same being and essence, but are related as three subjects or centers of consciousness, who indwell in each other (*perichoresis*) and so are profoundly united. Even though they are three subjects and three centers of awareness, they share the same consciousness, will, and being. God is therefore a triune unity. Yet Christians distinguish the three persons, Father, Son, and Spirit, in prayer and worship, sometimes addressing prayers to the Father (the "Our Father"), sometimes to the Son, sometimes to the Spirit.

Reference: M. John Farrelly, *The Trinity: Rediscovering the Central Christian Mystery* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005).

Points of agreement and disagreement

Muslims and Christians agree that God is the Creator and sustainer of the universe, that God is not a being or entity within the universe, and that God is not contingent. In both religions, God is seen as infinite, all-powerful, all knowing, as well as personal, just, merciful, good, loving, wise, provident, and so on. Indeed, Christians should be able to affirm every one of the ninety-nine names which Muslims attribute to God. Both religions agree that God reveals Godself through prophets. Both would agree that Abraham, Moses, and Jesus (as well as others) were true prophets. The Roman Catholic Bishops, at Vatican II, acknowledged that Muslims profess the faith of Abraham and worship the true God: "The plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, in the first place amongst whom are the Muslims; these profess to hold the faith of Abraham, and together with us they adore the one, merciful God, mankind's judge on the last day." (*Lumen Gentium* 16).

The greatest point of theological disagreement between Christians and Muslims is the doctrine of the Trinity. Muslims honor Jesus as a prophet, but argue that only God can be called divine. To call a human being or creature divine is to commit the sin of *shirk*, or idolatry, by associating a creature with God. The Qur'an states many times that God has no consort or Son. However, Christians do not think of Jesus as a son in a polytheistic sense, as if he were another God besides the Father. There may in fact be a parallel to Christian thinking on the trinity in Muslim thinking on the Qur'an. For Muslims, the Qur'an is the Word of God, and can be said to have preexisted in the mind of God before it was revealed to Muhammad. A debate arose in Muslim history as to whether the Qur'an was created or uncreated. This seems to be a close parallel to the debates in early Christianity concerning Arianism: was the Word of God (which became incarnate in Jesus) a creature, as the Arians claimed? Or was it one with God?-- uncreated in other words. Christians chose the latter. But in the same way, many Muslims believe the Qur'an existed in God from all eternity, uncreated, like the *Logos* in Christianity.

Points for Further Discussion

An obvious point for further discussion is the Trinity. The Muslim criticism of the Christian claim that Jesus is the eternal *Logos* of God who has taken on a human nature is that this is idolatry, that it amounts to the worship of a human being. Yet Christians have always denied that their worship is idolatrous and asserted that in worshipping Jesus they are in fact worshipping God. But is there such a thing as "Jesus-olatry" in Christianity, that is, a worship which worships the humanity of Jesus instead of his divinity? This should be explored in mutual discussion. (See below, the Muslim article on "Jesus.")

Another point for discussion might be the parallel between the Muslim conception of the Qur'an, and the Christian conception of Jesus as the incarnate *Logos*.