

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

مِنْ مَجْدِ الْبَيْتِ الْمَكِّيِّ الْفِكَرِ الْعِلْمِيِّ



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### **Differences between the Muslim and the Christian Concept of Divine Love**

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*Amman- The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan*

# Differences between the Muslim and the Christian Concept of Divine Love

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## 1. Introduction

All religions fulfill several functions. They try to establish a relationship between man and the larger Reality of which he forms a tiny part, orienting him within the immense universe that he inhabits.

This usually leads to a metaphysical interpretation of the world and conceptually to the postulation of a divine Supreme Being. These efforts sooner or later culminate in a science of God, verbally "theology", called *al-aqida* in Islam.

In everyday life religions are also called upon to provide rules for worshipping the Deity (*al-ʿibadat*) and for the conduct of human affairs in all fields (*al-muʿamalat*). These aspects of religiosity tend to command the greatest attention, not only because they impact directly on the conduct of everyday life, but also because they are more concrete and practical than the rather esoteric contributions of theology in its original and purest sense.

Worse, the role played by religions in politics today begets activities which totally overshadow the theological aspects of religion. This is true of all contemporary religious or pseudo-religious phenomena known as „-isms“.

They include American Evangelical Christians promoting a frighteningly

politicized fundamentalism as well as what now is called Islamism, i.e. a militant political ideology practiced by Muslims. 2

Therefore, as recognized by the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, it is now of the essence to focus on the very root of Islamic religiosity: the belief in Allah ta'ala as a Deity Who interacts with His creation in a *loving* manner and Who commands the *love* and affection of all true believers.

## **2. Loving God in Islam and Christianity**

### **1) The Christian Concept**

Christians consider their faith prototypically a "religion of love".

This is meant comprehensively, i.e. as a religious appeal, and even command, (a) to love God and (b) to love "one`s neighbour", i.e. all of mankind - friends and enemies as well.

#### **a) Loving God:**

The Christian command to love God, announced by Jesus, is embedded in St Mark 12, 30 and reads:

**And you shall love the Lord, your God, with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength; this is the first commandment.**

In the words of Hugo Ball ( d. 1927) the faithful are not on the look-out for reasons justifying the love of God. Rather, they "throw themselves into the love of God like pearl fishers diving into the ocean". 3

In reality, this command is not a Christian innovation at all. The same text -verbally - figured already in the Fifth Book of Moses 6,5. Indeed, according to the Bible God is not only lovable for being gracious, just and merciful.

Indeed, the Book of Songs - being the 5th Book of the Biblical Psalms - is a treasure of lines professing love of God. No wonder the Church incorporated the Psalms into Christian lore, just as the Muslims have adopted them (calling them az-zabur) as one of the few reliably revealed passages of the Old Testament:

**I love the Lord because He has heard my voice and my supplication** (116, 1).

**Gracious is the Lord, and righteous, yes, our God is merciful** (116, 5).

**Your commandments which I love shall be my delight** (119, 47).

**Oh, how I love your law ( 119, 97). Your commands I have taken as a heritage forever, for they are the rejoicing of my heart** (119,111).

It will be noticed that the authors of the Psalms well before the Medieval Christian mystics had already reached a level of adoration where loving God and obeying his commands did no longer result from fear but from devotion.

**The (unknown) author of the First Epistle of John 4 enlarges on this command by saying that God is love. He who dwells in love, dwells in God (4, 16).**

b) **Loving man:**

The Christian command to love God is intimately linked to the "second command", i.e. to love one`s fellow man:

**And the second command is alike, namely this: You shall love your neighbour like yourself. There is no other command greater than these** (St Mark 12, 31).

**In the Book of Mormon this command reappears: Every man should love his neighbor as himself** (Mosiah 23: 15).

Insightful the great Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner (d. 1984) commented this rule as follows: „Love of God can only be realized through unconditional love of one`s next-door neighbor since only that way one can pierce the hell of one`s egotism.“ 5

The Gospel makes clear that charity given to one`s brother is a way of loving God:

**In as much as you have done it to the least of my brothers, you have done it to Me** (St Matthew, 25, 40).

This is followed up by a statement of psychological depth:  
**"If a man should say "I love God" but hates his brother, he is a liar. For if he does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God Whom he has not seen ?"** (1 John 4, 20).

c) **Peculiarities:**

In two ways the Christian concept of love is peculiar:  
(i) The Christian notion of loving God is deeply colored by the Christian doctrine of Incarnation which since the 1st Ecumenical Council of Ephesus in 325 implies that Jesus inseparably was both divine and human, figuring among the three divine persons who according to Church dogma form Trinity.

Consequently, for Christians the love of God is identified very much with loving Jesus, i.e. a concrete and therefore "touchable" historic personality.

Thus an encyclopedic definition of Christendom reads: "Love, faithfully having become visible in Jesus Christ, is the way towards hope for mankind." Romano Guardini (d. 1968) went to an extreme when formulating that "Jesus Christ is the essence of Christianity - not an idea, not a programme, not an ideology, but a person". 6

This notion is retained in the Book of Mormon where we read **you must press forward with a steadfastness in Christ, having a perfect**

**brightness of hope and a love of God and of all men."** (2 Nephi 31:20).

## **2) The Muslim Concept**

### **a) Loving God**

(i) The climate of the Muslim devotion to God differs from the Christian one because for Muslims God has not been incarnated as Baby Jesus in the manger - cuddly and lovely - but rather remains an awesome Divinity, so close to us that we cannot see Him.

**No human vision can encompass Him, whereas He encompasses all human vision** (6: 103).

In short, He is the One beyond time and space Whose Being totally escapes our categorization. Indeed, we cannot catch His Reality with the perceptual network provided by our man-made (and therefore "loaded" languages).

In fact, talking about God is a linguistic trap. Ludwig Wittgenstein (d. 1951) was therefore right in terminating his *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* (first printed in 1921) with the stunning phrase: „Of what one cannot speak, about that one must remain silent“ (no. 7).

(ii) True, for Muslims, too, Allah is not only transcendent but also immanent since Allah is closer to us than our jugular vein (50: 16). And He has full knowledge of what is in the hearts (or bosoms) of people (11: 5; 42: 24; 57: 6; 64: 4; 67: 13).

Muslims are therefore expected **to love Allah more than anything else** (2: 165).

Nevertheless He remains unfathomable, unimaginable, unseizable, incomprehensible, indescribable. We are told that His are the most beautiful names / attributes (7: 180; 17: 110; 20: 8). But this is of little help because we must not coin any similitudees for God (6: 74).

It is of course true as well that in the Qur`an, for instance in the Light Verse (24: 35) and in the Throne Verse (59: 22-24) Allah has given us a self-description. Yet, do we really come closer to the secret when Allah identifies with the Light of the heavens and the earth ? Can we understand any of the divine attributes other than nominalistically, like Ibn Hazm before ? Indeed, for he to whom Allah gives no light, no light whatever has he (24:40).

Therefore, we can legitimately go about defining God in negative terms only, listing what can not be said of Him: That He cannot not exist; cannot die; cannot multiply Himself since God is a single God (2: 163; 16: 22, 51) .

(iii) All this is true and full of complexity. Nevertheless, loving God naively is possible not only for Christians but for Muslims as well since they are aware that **Allah in his goodness is limitless** (57:21) and that His **grace overspreads everything** (7: 156).

All Muslims have to be grateful that Muslim mystics - the Sufi movement - have been able on this basis to develop an Islamic mysticism of love in spite of all the difficulties of visualizing Allah. The Sufi approach is of course highly speculative. But emotionally it is more satisfactory than the cool soberness of the philosophical (al-mu-takalim) approach described above.

## **b) L o v i n g M a n**

As much as the Christian faith Islam teaches that the love of God must translate into compassion for man. However, Muslims are a bit more hesitant when it goes to use the word „love“. In general they prefer to designate the same attitude as brother- and sisterhood.

Statements on brotherhood in the Qur`an most explicitly refer to relations between Muslims ( 3: 103; 9: 11; 48: 29;49: 10 ). Even so, the Qur`an amply makes clear that its basic message is addressed to all of mankind ( 20: 55; 40: 64; 103; 114), not only by addressing its audience "Oh

mankind !"or "Oh Children of Adam!" ( 2: 169; 4: 170, 174; 7: 26, 31, 35; 10:23, 57, 104, 108; 22: 5; 31:33; 35: 5, 15; 49: 13; 53: 3 ). Indeed the Qur'an is a clear lesson for all men and a guidance and an admonition for all the God-conscious (3: 138).

As far as Christians are concerned the Qur'an does not pronounce an abstract concept like to "love your neighbour". However, in more concrete terms its verses establish that what is meant is the Christian way. Thus Muslims are urged to do good to their neighbours (4: 36), show kindness even to (non-aggressive) disbelievers (60: 8), spend on others in charity out of what one cherishes most (3: 92; 4: 114), and to be just in all dealings, no matter with whom (4: 58; 5: 8, 42; 7: 29; 16: 90; 68: 34).

If not in wording, in substance these rules add up to a Muslim "love thy neighbour"- command. By ruling out injustice, globally, Islam is commanding justice, globally.

### **3. God loving His creation in Islam and Christianity**

#### **1. The Christian Concept**

a) The idea that God might „love“ what He created is not self evident. On the contrary, one might argue that love establishes a longing and dependency between the lover and the loved one that is irreconcilable with God.

It seems feasible for the gods of Greek and Roman antiquity to pose as goddesses of love and beauty, like Aphrodite and Venus, because in antique mythology human love was a quality of gods.

b) Given the dual nature of Jesus in the eyes of Christians, his love for mankind may be understood more easily by them as corresponding to the human sentiment which all men and women experience. The same conclusion might be drawn from interpreting the history of Israel as a



sentimental mutual relationship between a loving God and his privileged "Chosen People".

- c) At any rate, in Christianity the loving nature of God is taken as an essential quality of deity, as expressed in startling fashion in 1John 4,19:

We love Him because He first loved us.

On this basis Jesus is seen by many Christians as sort of a perfect Sufi. In fact, in much of Christian mysticism was cultivated a startling intimacy with Jesus that for Muslims borders on, or crosses over into, blasphemy.

This was true in particular with the Spanish nun St Theresa of Avila (d.1582) and her spiritual friend St John of the Cross (d. around 1581).

This trend opened the door for a humanization of Jesus, allowing him to be depicted as suffering with man, even now.

## **2. The Islamic Concept**

- a) In the Qur`an we are told that Allah is self-sufficient (64:6, last sentence). This fundamental self-description definitely excludes that Allah is in love with his creation the way humans treasure, desire, and miss each other, trying to fuse their self with a beloved person to whom they may become utterly dependent.

God cannot possibly love his creation that human way ! Therefore it is safer and more accurate not to speak of "love" when addressing His clemency, compassion, benevolence, goodness, or mercy.

- b) This assessment is not contradicted by the many verses in which Allah ta`ala is mentioned as "loving" something. Thus it says that Allah loves

- \* the doers of good ( 3: 31, 148; 5: 93),
- \* those who are patient in adversity ( 3: 146),
- \* those who place their trust in Him ( 3: 159),
- \* those who are conscious of Him ( 9: 7)

- \* all who purify themselves ( 9: 108)
- \* those who believe and do perform good deeds (19: 96),
- \* those who act equitably ( 60: 8).

In all these cases Allah "loves" must be understood as Allah "approves", "is content with" or "views positively" those who act as described. "Love" here does not refer to emotional involvement.

That this interpretation is correct can be deduced as well from those verses in which Allah speaks of not loving. Thus we read that Allah does not love

- \* the disbelievers (3: 32),
- \* the transgressors (5: 87; 7: 55),
- \* the wasteful (7: 31), nor
- \* the traitors (8: 58).

"Not loving" here stands for disapproving, condemning, criticizing, rejecting.

- c) However, in 19: 96 we do read after all that the Most Gracious will bestow His love on those who attain to faith and do good deeds, in 3: 31 that If you indeed love Allah ... Allah will love you, and in 5: 54 that, under circumstances, God will in time bring forth people whom He loves and who love Him. Admittedly, these quotation could be seen as proof for a love of God for His creation comparable to the love human beings are capable of. But this interpretation must be ruled out as incompatible with the very nature of God as sublime and totally self-sufficient.

#### 4. Conclusion

- 1) The Christian and the Islamic considerations concerning love in divine context have been shown as not being identical but similar, as was to be expected.
- 2) Differences between the two approaches result above all from the
  - \* Muslim reticence to associate God with a humanized notion of love,
  - \* Muslim preference for the term „brotherhood“ in most cases for which Christians choose to employ the term „love“ (of one`s neighbour).
- 3) There is, however, a major theoretical discrepancy between the two denominations in as much as the concept of loving one`s enemy is nowhere to be found in Islamic doctrine (if one neglects certain Christianized Muslim mystic circles).

This difference is, however, more theoretical than real. Indeed, at no moment in history was Christian behavior on the ground determined by their doctrine of loving one`s enemy - not even to the slightest degree. And this observation is not surprising since loving one`s enemy goes against the very grain of people and therefore is no-where acted upon as a rule. Living according to the concept of loving one`s enemy was given only to a few people of saintly disposition, like St Francis of Assisi (d. 1226) on the Christian side and Jalal ad-Din Rumi (d. 1273) among Muslims. Their supreme humility and tolerance, their devotion to other men, and their joyous religious fervor were so singular that, as exceptions, they confirmed the rule sketched out above.

- 4) This leads me to a final consideration concerning the psychological impact of promoting a rule - to love one`s foe - that is inaccessible to 99,9 % of all people.

Admitting this situation Christians might argue that nevertheless we need lofty ideals to strive for, even if they are virtually unattainable.

Muslims might reply that it is detrimental for public morality if unattainable rules are promoted which, of course, are constantly violated by everybody in sight, because that (Christian) approach creates a climate of, and promotes, hypocrisy at a massive scale. I share the latter judgment, being afraid that people used to violating basic rules of their professed moral code might become cynical about morality as such. Indeed there is divine wisdom behind the fact that all religious obligations placed on Muslims while not being easy to fulfil are all within reach of the average believer.

In this sense, too, Islam by being more simple is more sane.

## **End Notes**

1. Buddhism is an exception in as much as Buddhists refuse entering into any speculation about transcendental reality. See Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai, *The Teaching of Buddha*, 9th ed., Kosaido Printing Co., Ltd.: Tokyo 2004.
2. The latter phenomenon has recently been diagnosed by Meghnad Desai, a British Lord, in his book on „Rethinking Islamism - the Ideology of the New Terror“, Tauris: London 2007.
3. Hugo Ball, p. 49.
4. The author of this letter is unknown. He certainly was not the favorite disciple of Jesus known under the name of John.
5. Karl Rahner, *Warum bin ich Christ ?* in: *Meyers Enzyklopädisches Lexikon*, Vol. 5, p. 672.
6. For both quotations (my translation) see Meyers (Note 5), p. 671

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