A Christian Approach To Islam
Part I
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In 1990, U.S. President George Bush was faced with an international crisis that he felt warranted an immediate and decisive military response. Under the direction of Saddam Hussein, Iraq invaded the small, bordering nation of Kuwait. Iraq's massive military, with its superior weaponry, experienced little difficulty occupying and controlling Kuwait. The threat of destabilization in this oil-rich region prompted President Bush to dispatch thousands of troops into Saudi Arabia, which began Operation Desert Shield. In early 1991, U.S. and allied troops successfully defeated Iraq's feared military in the now-famous Operation Desert Storm, and drove back the remnants of Hussein's tattered troops to Baghdad, the capital of Iraq.

During this conflict, which potentially threatened global peace, millions in the U.S. were glued to their television sets by anxiety over the fates of their fellow citizens. Technology and dauntless reporters kept us abreast of practically every frightening clash between Iraqi and allied forces. In the course of this continuous news coverage, Westerners not only were confronted with Saddam Hussein's dreaded military, but also were exposed to a culture that is dominated by an unfamiliar religion—Islam. With the increasing awareness of our global society, and with the worldwide proliferation of this religion, it is important for Christians to understand and respond to Islam.

ORIGIN OF ISLAM

Such a task must begin with Islam's origin and nature. The immensity of the subject and space restrictions preclude an exhaustive treatment of these points. Hence, only a broad survey of the origin and contours of Islamic thought and practices will be presented.

Muhammad, Founder of Islam

The origin of Islam can be traced back to Muhammad (var. sp.: Muhammed, Mohammed), who was born c. A.D. 570 at Mecca, the holy city in western Saudi Arabia. Muhammad's practically unknown father died before his birth, and his mother died when he was only six. The early orphaned Muhammad was reared by his grandfather and uncle who, though disputed by some Western scholars, appear to have been prominent members of the Qurayah tribe. This Arabian clan was the guardian of the Kaabah (var. sp.: Ka'bah), the great shrine at Mecca in whose walls the sacred black stone was embedded. According to Arabian tradition, the black stone fell from heaven in the time of Adam, a possible indication that it was a meteorite that landed in the sands of Arabia (Humble, 1980, 4:52). Muslims believe that, on his pilgrimage to Mecca with Ishmael, Abraham built the Kaabah and positioned the meteorite within its walls. This shrine, which figures prominently in Muhammad's life and the establishment and development of Islam, was dedicated to the Arabs' pantheon of deities.

While Muhammad's early life is somewhat obscure, apparently he was employed by a rich widow, Khadija, who entrusted him with her caravans. Khadija was so impressed with his

dependable and conscientious service that she married Muhammad, provided him with wealth and success, and encouraged his religious inclinations. With his wife's support, Muhammad increasingly withdrew from business affairs, and spent much of his time in the seclusion of the desert meditating and reflecting on life (Schmalfuss, 1982, p. 311). During this process, Muhammad developed a passionate monotheistic belief, and became extremely frustrated with the polytheism and superstitions of his fellow Arabs. Though it is difficult to determine the extent to which variant shades of Christianity and Judaism influenced the development of Muhammad's strict monotheism, it is clear that "at some period of his life he absorbed much teaching from Talmudic sources and had contact with some form of Christianity" (Anderson, 1975, p. 93).

Muhammad's Revelations and the Qur'an

According to Islamic tradition, Muhammad, at the age of forty, began to receive revelations from God through the angel Gabriel. His first alleged encounter with the heavenly messenger was quite violent. While Muhammad was in a deep trance, Gabriel appeared to him and, either by choking or some other life-threatening gesture, forced Muhammad into submission. "Read," Gabriel demanded, "in the name of thy Lord, who created man from clots of blood" (*sura* 96:1; cf., Schmalfuss, 1982, p. 311). Since the encounter was both violent and accompanied by convulsions that sent him into an unconscious trance, Muhammad at first was unsure of the source of his vision. He feared that he possessed one of the *jinn* (demons) commonly believed to inhabit Arab poets and soothsayers (Anderson, 1975, p. 94). Khadija and others, however, assured Muhammad of the divine source of his visions. Once convinced of his prophetic call, Muhammad's revelations occurred with increasing frequency.

Since, as many Muslims argue, Muhammad was illiterate, he did not record these revelations personally. During his lifetime, however, his followers transcribed and collected much of Muhammad's oral teachings into the Qur'an (var. sp.: Koran), though many passages were preserved only in the memory of his followers and were committed to writing after his death (Shorrosh, 1988, p. 24). The word Qur'an derives from the Arabic word *qara'a* ("to recite"), a designation consistent with the recurring mandate for Muhammad to "proclaim" (i.e., "recite" or "read") the words of Allah. Consisting of 114 chapters (called *suras*), the Qur'an is a non-chronological collection of verses, reflecting various periods in Muhammad's life. Each *sura* of the Qur'an is subdivided into verses (*ayat*). Interestingly, the Arabic word *ayat* carries with it the meaning of "a miracle." For those seeking certification of his claims, Muhammad would appeal to the Qur'an itself as miraculous confirmation of his divine appointment to the prophetic office (Wilson, 1982, p. 315). All Muslims, regardless of their sectarian affiliation, continue to regard the Qur'an as their sacred and authoritative text.

Muhammad's Rejection and Flight from Mecca

Once convinced that his first revelatory experiences in the desert were from God, Muhammad began to denounce openly the polytheism of his people and to proclaim a rigid monotheism. By emphasizing the resurrection of the dead, and the subsequent judgment of God, he challenged the populace to submit to the One (Allah) true God, and to show compassion to the poor. Consistent

with this message of submission, the word "Islam" is the infinitive of the Arabic verb "to submit," and "Muslim" ("one who submits") is the present participle of the same verb.

Muhammad's monotheistic message threatened the financial interests of many in Mecca who profited from the regular pilgrimages of polytheists to the Kaabah. As might be expected, Muhammad met with considerable opposition, and succeeded in making only a few converts. Due to the increasingly aggressive hostility directed against him by the traders at Mecca, Muhammad and his small band of followers fled from Mecca to Medina on July 16, 622. This "flight" from Mecca, which Muslims call the "*Hijra*," marks the official beginning of the Islamic religion. Reflecting this point of origin, the Islamic calendar is calibrated to the *Hijra*. According to Islamic chronology, for example, A.D. 630 would be designated 8 A.H. ("in the year of the *Hijra*").

Unlike his experience in Mecca, where he was rejected as an eccentric purveyor of an unpopular—and unprofitable—religion, Muhammad enjoyed greater success in Medina. There, he "soon became statesman, legislator and judge—the executive as well as the mouthpiece of the new theocracy" (Anderson, 1975, p. 95). Several *suras* in the Qur'an, which emphasize obedience to the Prophet and insist on his favorable treatment, reflect Muhammad's influential position at Medina (cf., 3:29,126; 4:17-18; 24:63-64; 49:2-4; see Geisler and Saleeb, 1993, p. 57).

Though significantly greater than at Mecca, Muhammad's success at Medina was not as extensive as he desired. He particularly was disappointed at his lack of reception among the Jewish population. Rather than embracing him for his monotheism, the Jews eventually rejected Muhammad's prophetic claims, and criticized his inaccurate accounts of Old Testament events. It became obvious that there were serious discrepancies between Qur'anic and biblical details of the same incident. To maintain the divine origin of the Qur'an, Muhammad was compelled to charge the Jews with either corrupting, or misquoting, their own scriptures. This allegation further heightened the tension between Muhammad's followers and the Jews, and eventually precipitated the banishment or massacre of Jewish tribes in that area (Anderson, 1975, p. 95).

The Return to Mecca

Once his relationship with the Jews was severed, Muhammad no longer looked to Jerusalem, but refocused on Mecca as the center of the Islamic religion. Muhammad's renewed interest in Mecca necessitated his purging the town of its polytheism, thus bringing it into harmony with the monotheism of Islam. Enlisting the help of nomadic Arab tribes, Muhammad led a series of armed raids on Mecca, and in A.D. 630 he captured the city with no resistance. Mecca quickly was purged of all its polytheistic symbols, and the Kaabah became the focal point of the religion of the one true God. Before his death in A.D. 632 (11 A.H.), Muhammad had made great strides in unifying the Arab tribes throughout the Arabian peninsula under the banner of Islam (see Anderson, 1975, p. 96; Noss, as quoted in McDowell, 1983, p. 381).

MAJOR DIVISIONS OF ISLAM

Since Muhammad neither left a male heir nor named a successor, his death created an immediate leadership crisis in Islam. The nature of Islam, however, which encompassed both civil and religious concerns, demanded a successor (Caliph, or Khalifa) to guide its adherents in applying the principles of the Qur'an to contemporary circumstances. Naming such an individual proved to be a difficult and divisive task. Along with other issues of interpretation, the role of, and criteria for appointing, the Caliph eventually fragmented Islam into two major divisions that remain today: Sunni and Shi'a (see Kung, 1986).

The Sunni

The Sunni branch, claiming approximately 90% of all Muslims, argued that the Caliph should belong to Muhammad's tribe, the Qurayah, and that the community should choose him by the process of consensus (*ijma*). Since Muhammad was the "Seal of the Prophets," the Sunnis considered the responsibilities of the Caliph merely to guard—not continue—the prophetic legacy, and to provide "for the administration of community affairs in obedience to the Qur'an and prophetic precedent" (Kerr, 1982, p. 330). Within thirty years of Muhammad's death, four Caliphs were appointed in succession: Abu Bakr (632-634), 'Umar (634-644), 'Uthman (644-656), and 'Ali (656-661). Sunnis regard these first Islamic leaders as "the four rightly guided Caliphs," since they lived so close to Muhammad. Because of their chronological proximity to Muhammad, Sunnis believe that the *sunna* (behavior or practice) of these four Caliphs, together with the Prophet's, is authoritative for all Muslims. The Sunnis derive their name from this emphasis on the *sunna*. While there are subdivisions of this group, distinguished by specific points of interpretation, they all call themselves Sunni.

The Shi'a

The other major branch of Islam, which claims about 10% of the Muslim population and exists primarily in Iraq and Iran, is the more militant Shi'a. The Shi'ites, as those comprising the Shi'a sect are called, splintered from the Sunnis primarily over the question of the Caliphate. Regarding this matter, there are specifically two points of disagreement between Shi'ites and Sunnis. First, the Shi'ites place more rigid genealogical restrictions on the Caliph than do the Sunnis. On the one hand, Sunnis believe that the Caliph should be a descendent of Muhammad's tribe. On the other hand, Shi'ites argue that the Caliph should descend specifically from 'Ali, Muhammad's son-in-law. In fact, the word Shi'ite means "partisan" and indicates that Shi'ites are "partisans of 'Ali" (Rood, 1994). Second, the Shi'ites differ with the Sunnis regarding the authority of the Caliph. Unlike the Sunnis, Shi'ite Muslims believe that the Islamic leader, whom they call the *imam*, is more than merely a guardian of Muhammad's prophetic legacy. Rather, Muhammad bequeathed 'Ali with his *wilaya* (i.e., his "spiritual abilities"), enabling him to interpret the Qur'an and to lead the Islamic community infallibly. Though there are various interpretations, Shi'ites generally believe that the *wilaya* has been passed down through the subsequent generations of 'Ali's descendants. They further believe that this "cycle of the *wilaya*" will continue until the last day when humankind will be resurrected and judged (see Kerr, 1982, p. 331).

The majority faction within the Shi'a branch, known as the Imamis (most of whom live in Iran), believes that the completion of the *wilaya* cycle will end with the messianic return of the twelfth *imam*. According to this sect, the twelfth *imam* has been in "occultation" (the state of hiding) since the third century of Islam. They believe, however, that the *ayatollahs* (senior experts in Islamic law) have access to the hidden *imam*, and thus, have the right to interpret Islamic law and make religious rulings (Kerr, 1982, p. 331). The late Ayatollah Khomeini, perhaps the most widely remembered Shi'ite leader among contemporary Westerners, was considered to be the spokesman for the hidden *imam.*

Sufis

Though more a movement within, rather than a sect of, Islam, a third identifiable group that should be mentioned is the Sufis. Reacting to the externally oriented, and legalistic disposition of the Islamic religious system, Sufis seek a mystical experience of God. The word Sufism usually is translated "mysticism," which reflects this emphasis on a personal religious experience. Since Sufis, who belong to either the Sunni or Shi'a sect, desire more than an intellectual knowledge of Allah, they are prone to a number of superstitious practices (Rood, 1994).

BASIC BELIEFS OF ISLAM

As might be expected, in light of the vast diversity in Islam, there are many variant beliefs among Muslims worldwide. Though there are differences of opinion surrounding their application, six articles of faith form the core of the Islamic religion.

1. **Monotheism.** As indicated earlier, pre-Islamic Arabs were polytheists. Due to Muhammad's successful monotheistic campaign, Muslims recognize and devote themselves to only one God, whom they call Allah. Worshiping or attributing deity to any other being is considered by Muslims to be *shirk*, or blasphemy.

2. **Angels and *jinn*.** Muslims believe in a well-structured organization of angelic beings. At the lowest level in the hierarchy of spirit beings in Islamic thought are the *jinn*, who are capable both of committing good and evil deeds, and of inhabiting human beings. After his first frightening encounter with Gabriel, Muhammad feared that he was possessed by one of these potentially fiendish beings. The angels of God are above the *jinn* in rank. In Islamic angelology, each Muslim is accompanied by two angels—one on the right, the other on the left. This angelic pair is responsible for recording the good and evil deeds of the Muslim, respectively.

3. **God's holy books.** The Qur'an refers to numerous other volumes that Muslims consider as God's holy books. Chief among these Islamic sacred texts are: the Mosaic Law; the Davidic Psalms; the Gospel (*Injil*) given to Jesus; and the Qur'an revealed to Muhammad. Muslims, following Muhammad's allegation, contend that the original Torah (Pentateuch), Psalms, and Gospels have been corrupted by Christian and Jewish writers, and essentially lost. As the final revelation from God, the Qur'an supersedes all previous revelations and truth claims (Shorrosh, 1988, p. 30).

4. **God's prophets.** Muslims believe that there has been a long succession of prophets through whom Allah revealed his will. While there is no consensus regarding the exact number of prophets, Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus are considered the five prophetic predecessors to Muhammad. There seems to be universal agreement among Muslims that Muhammad was God's supreme and final prophet—the "seal" of the prophets.

5. **Resurrection and Judgment.** Similar to elements of Christian eschatology, Muslims believe in a general resurrection of humankind, followed by a final judgment. In this connection, human works are central. How successful a Muslim was at keeping the mandates of Islamic law determines his or her eternal fate. Those who have accomplished more good deeds than bad will be admitted into paradise, a place abounding with sensual pleasures (e.g., luxury, physical comfort, abundant food, lovely maidens, etc., see *sura* 4:57-58; 37:45-48). Those who are deficient in good deeds will be consigned to hell in which, among other excruciating torments, they will be attired in fiery garments (*sura* 22:19-20; cf., 18:28-29).

6. **Predestination.** Though not a mandatory doctrine, most Muslims accept a rigid form of predestination reflected in the comment made by the devout: "If Allah wills it." This belief holds that all events, good or bad, are determined directly by Allah. It is thus the function of the dedicated Muslim to "submit to that divine determination with obedient thankfulness," though he or she still must face Allah's strict justice (Shorrosh, 1988, p. 32).

BASIC PRACTICES OF ISLAM

As already indicated, human works play a crucial role in Islam. The most important works or duties generally acknowledged by Muslims may be summarized in what are commonly called the "Five Pillars of Islam."

1. **The creed** (*kalima* or *shahada*). "*La ilaha il' Allah, Muhammadan Rasoulu Allah*." These words, translated, "There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah," constitute the essential creed of Islam. This is the first duty of every Muslim, for it is necessary to recite this creed before at least two witnesses to become a Muslim. And, the faithful Muslim will repeat this creed constantly.

2. **Prayers** (*salat*). Muslims, regardless of their social or economic status, submit to a rigorous daily regimen of prayer. Five times a day (only three for Shi'ites), Muslims respond to the call to prayer by the *muezzin* (a Muslim crier) from a tower called a *minaret*, which is part of the *mosque* (the place of public worship). They recite prescribed prayers together with the appropriate action of placing the forehead to the ground. Regardless of their geographic location, the faithful Muslim will face toward Mecca and perform this prayer ritual at the appropriate intervals. It is further incumbent on all adult male Muslims to gather each Friday at noon for community prayer, and to hear a weekly sermon.

3. **Almsgiving** (*zakat* and *sadaqa*). Orphaned himself at a young age, Muhammad was very sensitive to the plight of the destitute. Though some do so more extensively than others, several Qur'anic *suras* emphasize the duty of Muslims to give alms (2,4,19,23,33,107). Almsgiving is divided into two broad categories. The *zakat* are the legal alms, which require that Muslims

allocate 2.5% (one-fortieth) of their income and merchandise for this charitable purpose. Different percentages are assigned to agricultural produce and cattle. The *sadaqa* are free-will offerings that are above and beyond the legally binding proportion of almsgiving.

4. **Fasting** (*Ramadan*). During the month of *Ramadan* (the ninth lunar month of the Islamic year), all healthy, adult Muslims (except pregnant women, nursing mothers, and travelers) are required to abstain from food, liquids, and sexual intercourse during daylight hours. There are both historical and theological reasons for *Ramadan*. Historically, Muslims believe that during the ninth lunar month, Muhammad received the first revelations from God and that during this same month, he and his followers made their historic escape from Mecca to Medina. Theologically, the fast helps develop a Muslim's self-control, reliance on Allah, and sympathy for the poor.

5. **The Pilgrimage** (*Hajj*). Every Muslim is expected to make the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in his or her lifetime. Since the rituals involved in the pilgrimage are physically demanding, the old or infirm can perform this duty by proxy. The *Hajj* serves to solidify Islamic faith, and to promote the ideas of worldwide unity and equality among Muslims (Rood, 1994; McDowell, 1983, p. 392).

6. **The Holy War** (*jihad*). Though not a part of the Five Pillars, the *jihad* is a duty usually associated with them. The word means "exertion" or "struggle" on behalf of God. Muslims are divided regarding the Qur'an's call to *jihad*. Extremists interpret *jihad* as literal warfare against non-Muslims, and believe that Muslims who die in a holy war are assured of a place in paradise. More moderate interpreters suggest that the Qur'an's call to arms refers to a specific incident of Muhammad's armed conflict with his enemies, and should neither be applied universally nor pressed literally (Al-Ashmawy, 1995, p. 158).

In addition to these basic beliefs and practices, Muslims are guided by numerous laws and traditions contained in the *hadith*. The *hadith*, which was compiled after the Qur'an was completed, reportedly contains Muhammad's examples and statements regarding various topics. The Qur'an and *hadith* address virtually every aspect of life, making Islam not just a religion, but an all-encompassing way of life.

CONCLUSION

In this installment, I have surveyed briefly the complex landscape of Islam. In the [following article](), I will attempt to identify the points of tension between Christianity and Islam, and offer a response to the latter's core beliefs.

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Part II

Unlike the popular notion, Islam is not the exclusive religion of Arab countries in the Middle East, but has found prolific expression around the globe. It is the fastest-growing religion in the world, claiming up to one billion adherents worldwide. To put that in perspective, this figure indicates that one out of every five people is a Muslim. In the United States, there are now up to five million Muslims, and over 1,100 mosques or Islamic centers (see Rood, 1994; Ahmad, 1995). Muslims, therefore, no longer are the vague features of geographically detached people, but could be among those whom we encounter in our daily routines. In light of these considerations, properly understanding, and responding to, Islam become increasingly apparent and personal.

The Persian Gulf War, and other such conflicts involving the U.S. and Islamic nations, have created within Westerners largely negative images of Muslims. Often they are associated with the stubbled faces and cold stares of fanatical terrorists who, to advance their political agenda, bomb public facilities, snuffing out hundreds of innocent lives. While some militant Islamic sects have conducted terrorist activity in the U.S. and other Western nations, they are not necessarily representative of all Muslims (see Al-Ashmawy, 1996; Sial, 1995). Simply exposing the radical views held by violent sects would not be a responsible critique of Islam. As Islamic writer

Mubashar Ahmad correctly has objected, such an approach "would be as if someone tries to understand Christianity by reading the news of what is happening politically and religiously in Northern Ireland or of apartheid in South Africa" (1995).

PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

In light of Ahmad's legitimate caveat, at least two observations need to guide an analysis of, and response to, Islam. First, as indicated in part one of this series, Islam is not a monolithic system, but contains several identifiable sects and movements (Brantley, 1996; see Rood, 1994). It is "a religious movement that has experienced constant change over the centuries and has acquired a high degree of inner diversity, a faith shared by concrete men and women with a broad spectrum of attitudes and feelings" (Kung, 1986, p. 22). Not all Muslims engage in, or support, the terrorist activity of fundamentalist Islamic sects. In fact, nonextremist Muslims decry the intolerant Islam preached by militant fanatics whose messages, they contend, are "a cover for advancing their political agenda and their lust for power, and ideology more akin to fascism and Marxism than to the Islamic faith" (Al-Ashmawy, 1996, p. 157). Thus, a Christian response to Islam must guard against stereotyping Muslims as blood-thirsty rogues with no regard for human life.

Second, we need to be sensitive to, and try to appreciate, the anti-west/anti-U.S. sentiment among many Middle Eastern Muslims. Historically, Muslims have equated, and continue to equate, the West with Christianity. From this perspective, "Christian" and "Muslim" nations have had a long history of conflict, leaving both with animosity toward one another. While Islamic countries have committed their share of atrocities against Christian nations, the former do have some legitimate grievances against the latter. The Crusades (c. 1050-1291), for example, are etched indelibly into Muslim minds. In the Colonial period (c. 1450-1970), Western nations subjugated about ninety percent of the Muslim world, which instilled in many Muslims a deep desire to avenge such shame and humiliation. Perhaps the greatest blow to the Islamic ego was when, after thirteen hundred years of occupation, they lost possession of Jerusalem to the Jews in 1967. Muslims blame this turn of events on the "Christian" West for creating the state of Israel in 1948 (see McCurry, 1994). Though we might reasonably object that they have skewed history to a certain extent (see van Ess, 1986, pp. 37-38), Muslims nonetheless view the West, and particularly the U.S., through lenses colored by this history of Muslim casualties. If we are to have any success in reaching Muslims with the gospel of Jesus Christ, we must approach them with sensitivities toward their, and our, past.

CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM: POINTS OF TENSION

While we recognize the vast diversity of thought and attitudes within Islam, our response to this world religion must be limited to its core beliefs. Before offering such a critique, it will be both helpful and crucial to clarify the points of tension between Christianity and Islam. While on a superficial level it appears that Christianity and Islam share common theological ground in some particulars (e.g., monotheism), a closer scrutiny of the two religions exposes several fundamental differences that can be reconciled only by a costly compromise by either the Christian, the Muslim, or both.

Monotheism of Islam

At first glance, it appears that the rigid monotheism of Islam largely is compatible with Christian thought. The idea expressed in the Qur'an that God is "the one, the most unique," and the "immanently indispensable" to Whom "no one is comparable" (*sura* 112:1-2,4), generally agrees with biblical concepts of God (cf. Deuteronomy 6:4; Psalm 86:8; Isaiah 40:18; 44:6). Yet, the monotheism of Islam is so rigid and inflexible that it repudiates two crucial, and inextricably linked, doctrines of historic Christianity.

1. **The Trinity.** Though questioned by some groups within the pale of Christianity, the concept of the trinity has strong biblical support (see Bromling, 1991). This doctrine does not suggest, as is alleged by non-Trinitarians, a tri-theistic construct of God. It simply affirms that there are three distinct persons (i.e., the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), yet all are one in **essence**. In other words, while the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit sustain distinct relationships to one another, they share the same divine nature (see Geisler and Saleeb, 1993, p. 266). In this regard, Christianity and Islam are firmly opposed to one another. Unlike the monotheism of Christianity that allows for a plurality within the divine essence, Islam condemns such a pluralistic concept of God (see Kaleem, 1994). The Qur'an cautions the "people of the book" (i.e., Christians) against calling God "Trinity" for "God is only one God" (*sura* 4:171).

2. **The Deity of Jesus.** Consistent with Islam's repudiation of the Trinitarian idea of God, the Qur'an, though it exalts Jesus in many particulars, explicitly denies the deity of Jesus. While the Qur'an acknowledges that Jesus was a miraculous "sign" and divine "blessing" (19:21), Islamic Christology is totally devoid of divine content (see Kuitse, 1992, 20:357). Since God's transcendent glory prohibits His begetting a son, the Qur'an presents Jesus only as the "son of Mary," not the Son of God (4:171). Rather than possessing the divine nature as in biblical Christology (Philippians 2:8-12; Colossians 1:18), the Qur'anic Jesus "was only a creature" (43:59) brought into existence by God's creative word (3:42-52). Islam's view of Jesus demonstrates the vast difference between it and Christianity. And, far from being a peripheral issue, the deity of Jesus is an essential tenet of Christianity. Thus, while Christianity and Islam share a common monotheistic belief, there is no resolving their Christological differences as they stand.

The Atonement of Jesus Christ

Another cardinal doctrine of Christianity—the atonement—is discarded by the Qur'an. That Jesus died **for our sins**, was buried, and rose again from the grave according to the Scriptures is the thrust of the gospel message (1 Corinthians 15:1-4). Contrary to the conclusion of some modern theologians, Paul argued that Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection were actual events of history. Following Paul's line of reasoning to its logical conclusion, if Christ did not actually rise from the dead there is no gospel, and the entire Christian system is annulled (1 Corinthians 15:12-19). A denial of these core events is tantamount to rejecting the veracity of Christianity.

Yet, Islam does deny these central Christian events, charging that Jesus actually did not die on the cross (see Ijaz, n.d.). In a context in which the Jews are excoriated for repeatedly breaking God's covenant, the Qur'an reads:

And for saying [in boast]: "We killed the Christ, Jesus, son of Mary, who was an apostle of God;" but they neither killed nor crucified him, though it so appeared to them. Those who disagree in the matter are only lost in doubt. They have no knowledge about it other than conjecture, for surely they did not kill him, but God raised him up (in position) and closer to Himself; and God is all-mighty and all wise (*sura* 4:157-158).

This one reading has generated considerable debate among Islamic commentators. The phrase, "so it appeared to them," particularly has been problematic. Generally, orthodox Muslims have interpreted this to mean that in some mysterious manner, God made another person so resemble Jesus that he was crucified by mistake. By this means God intervened and frustrated the Jews' evil purpose, and subsequently transported Jesus into heaven (see Geisler and Saleeb, 1992, pp. 64-65). According to Norman Anderson, Muhammad's aversion to Jesus' death as reflected in the Qur'an could have been motivated by several factors. Perhaps it was due, Anderson suggests, to the influence of Gnostic views, to his disdain for the "superstitious veneration" of the symbol of the cross in seventh-century Asia, or to his disbelief that God would allow one of His prophets to die in such a disgraceful manner (1975, p. 101). Of these possibilities, the latter is the most likely candidate.

Regardless of the rationale behind Islam's denial of Jesus' crucifixion, one fact remains: Islam rejects the idea of Jesus' crucifixion and, by implication, His vicarious suffering for sinful humanity. As already indicated, such a denial strikes at the very heart of the Christian system. Once again, any points of contact between Islam and Christianity are eclipsed by this fundamental difference.

Means of Salvation

As a corollary to its denial of Jesus' death, Islam differs significantly with Christianity regarding the means of humankind's salvation. In the Christian system, all responsible human beings without Christ are powerless slaves to a ruthless taskmaster—sin (Romans 5:6-11; 6:15-18; Ephesians 2:14-18). Since there is no means of liberating ourselves from the bondage of sin, human beings desperately are in need of a savior. In response to this critical condition, God, motivated by His love, entered into human history as a man, and offered His sinless life for humanity. The New Testament writers employed several images (financial, military, sacrificial, and legal) to convey in a concrete way the soteriological purpose of Christ's death. Through the cross, sinners are purchased (1 Corinthians 6:20; 7:23), victorious (Colossians 1:12; 2:15; 1 Corinthians 15:24-28), atoned for (Romans 3:25; 1 Corinthians 5:7), and acquitted and reconciled (2 Corinthians 5:16-19; Colossians 1:19-20; see Guthrie, 1994, pp. 251-256). While scholars continue to debate the theological details of these images, it is clear from the New Testament that God took the initiative in the salvation of humanity. It further emphasizes that salvation is not by human works of merit, but by God's grace through an expressive faith in the redemptive act of Christ on the cross (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Islam, however, has no place for a suffering savior in its redemptive system. It does not view human beings as enslaved by sin without the ability of self-emancipation. Though it emphasizes the role of God's mercy and forgiveness in salvation, Islam teaches that God's pleasure, and thus

one's place in Heaven, are earned (cf. *suras* 2:207; 39:69). On the Day of Judgment, according to Islam, those who have fulfilled their religious duties, and compensated for their altruistic deficiencies by performing additional good deeds, will attain salvation. Those whose good deeds are insufficient, however, "shall forfeit their souls and abide in Hell forever" (*sura* 23:102-103). In the final analysis, according to Islam, humankind's spiritual need is not for a divine savior, but simply for divine guidance.

A BRIEF EVALUATION OF ISLAM

The points of tension between Islam and Christianity demonstrate the theological incompatibility of these two world views. To embrace Islam is to deny the essentials of the Christian faith; likewise, to espouse Christianity is to compromise seriously the core beliefs of Islam. Having laid out the basic practices and duties of Islam, and having highlighted the distinctions between Islam and Christianity, a Christian evaluation of Islam now is in order. Due to space restrictions, we will devote our attention to two crucial points of Islam: the nature of God, and the Qur'an.

The Nature of God

As already indicated, the stringent monotheism of Islam categorizes the Trinitarian concept of deity espoused by Christians as tri-theism. This is due to a misunderstanding of the Father/Son relationship between God and Jesus as mentioned in the Bible (see John 10:29-33). For Jesus to sustain such a filial kinship to God, "often in the Muslim mind implies some kind of sexual generation" (Geisler and Saleeb, 1993, pp. 134-135). Of course, the term "Father" or "Son" does not necessitate physical procreation any more than Saddam Hussein's description of the Gulf War as the "Mother of all Battles" demands that the conflict had a physical womb. The description of Jesus as the "only begotten Son" of God (John 3:16) refers, not to a physical act of procreation, but to His unique relationship to God the Father.

The idea expressed in the Qur'an that God's glory prohibits Him from begetting a son (in the carnal sense; *sura* 4:171) provides further insight into the theology of Islam. God is so transcendent and unified to Himself that He is dissociated totally from creation and, thus, acts impersonally (McDowell, 1983, p. 393). To many Muslims, this implies that God is so detached from our human existence that He has no (knowable) essence; He is absolute Will. A God with no essence means a God with no essential characteristics. From this perspective, though the Qur'an extols God as "the Compassionate, the Merciful," such characteristics are not rooted in His essence but are the results of His capricious will. As the Qur'an indicates, God is merciful simply because "He has **decreed** mercy for Himself" (*sura* 6:12). In short, in Islamic theology what God **does** determines who God **is**. Since God's actions are contingent on His arbitrary will, then who God is ultimately is an act of His volition.

Such a concept of God, however, involves a serious moral difficulty. It implies the possibility that, had God willed it, He might as easily have been "The Merciless" rather than "The Merciful." For, as Geisler and Saleeb have observed, "if God is Will, without any real essence, then he does not do things because they are right; rather, they are right because he does them" (1993, pp. 136-137). In the final analysis, the God of Islam has no nature by which He is inherently prohibited from, or motivated toward, certain actions. The God of Christianity,

however, has such a nature that self-limits His actions (e.g., He cannot lie, Titus 1:2). In addition, rather than being the products of His volition, the benevolent attributes of the Christian God (e.g., goodness, mercy, love, grace) are part of His essence.

These divergent concepts of God find practical expression in profoundly different ways. Consistent with Islamic theology, the concern of orthodox Muslims is not to know God in an intimate fashion, but simply to obey Him. The God of Islam does not reveal Himself; rather, He reveals only His will, to which Muslims are to submit in an external fashion. On the contrary, the God of Christianity has revealed not only His propositional truth in the Bible, but also His essence in the person of Jesus Christ. Thus, Christians seek not only to do God's will, but to be in a covenant relationship with Him. Due to the Islamic concept of God, together with its works-oriented means of salvation, Muslims cannot have the sense of security that Christians enjoy through God's grace as taught in the Bible.

The Qur'an

To Muslims, the Qur'an is not merely the counterpart of the Christian Bible, but is the Islamic equivalent of Christ. According to Muslim scholar, Yusuf K. Ibish, "If you want to compare it with anything in Christianity, you must compare it with Christ Himself " (as quoted in Geisler and Saleeb, 1993, p. 179). Consistent with Ibish's observation, Muslims assign to the Qur'an the same attributes that Christians apply to Christ. For example, just as Jesus is the human manifestation of the eternal God in biblical Christology (John 1:1-3,14; Hebrews 1:1-3), the Qur'an is the linguistic representation of God's eternal Word. In short, while in Christianity the divine Word became a human being, in Islam the eternal Word became a book. Muslims further argue that the Qur'an not only is the inspired, inerrant, eternal, and final revelation of God that supersedes all others, but is also the ultimate divine miracle. In fact, as stated in part one of this series, it was the only miracle Muhammad offered when asked to display his prophetic credentials. Muslims employ several arguments to support the claim of the Qur'an's miraculous status. Consider two of the most popular arguments, and a brief response.

1. *Unique literary style.* To many Muslims the strongest evidence supporting the miraculous nature of the Qur'an is its impressive literary style. The Arabic in which the Qur'an was written has rhyming, rhythmic qualities that delight the Arab's ears (Shorrosh, 1988, p. 25). Muslims further hold that the Qur'an's rhetoric, clarity of expression, and concepts are unparalleled in the world of literature. To Muslim apologists, these literary qualities indicate the divine origin of the Qur'an.

To question the literary quality of the Qur'an, as many attempt to do, is an inadequate response to this argument because the Muslim simply would point out that only those who understand the nuances of the Arabic language can appreciate this aspect of the Qur'an. Further, determining the quality of a production introduces the dimension of subjectivity. Hence, the question is: Does eloquence indicate divine inspiration? At best, the eloquence of the Qur'an only suggests that Muhammad was a gifted orator. If eloquence is strong evidence for divine inspiration, the works of Homer and Shakespeare are candidates for this exalted status as well. In short, the argument from eloquence is not a sufficient proof of inspiration.

2. *Muhammad's illiteracy.* A controversial verse in the Qur'an forms the basis for the belief in Muhammad's illiteracy. In that passage, Allah promises to bestow mercy on those who, among other duties, "follow the Apostle—the Unlettered Prophet..." (*sura* 7:157). The phrase "the Unlettered Prophet," often is interpreted to indicate Muhammad's illiteracy. If so, Muslims contend, this is further confirmation of the Qur'an's divine origin, since it would have been highly improbable, if not impossible, for a formally-uneducated prophet to produce such a quality work.

There are at least two points to make in response to this claim. First, it is questionable whether Muhammad actually was illiterate. Some Arabic scholars contend that the words *al umni* "the unlettered," actually mean "the heathen," or "the gentile," which is reflected in more recent translations (see Ali, 1993, p. 148). Second, if Muhammad actually were illiterate, that fact alone would not necessitate that the Qur'an was dictated to him by God. One's level of formal training does not necessarily enhance one's intelligence or creative abilities. Even if he could neither read nor write, Muhammad could have dictated his messages to a scribe who subsequently wrote them down. In the final analysis, it is plausible that someone with no formal training could have produced the Qur'an. Hence, the question of Muhammad's illiteracy is a peripheral issue when it comes to establishing the divine origin of the Qur'an.

Islamic apologists offer other arguments to support the Qur'an's claim of divine authorship. Among them are the alleged perfect preservation of the Qur'anic text, fulfilled prophecies, its unity, and scientific accuracy. These evidences, however, similarly prove to be unconvincing (see Geisler and Saleeb, 1993, pp. 204; Lawson, 1991).

CONCLUSION

Of course, Muslims, as do other non-believers, challenge the evidences for biblical inspiration. Since, generally speaking, Islamic countries protect the Qur'an from criticism, it has not been subjected to the same intensity of critical analysis as has the Bible. Despite the centuries-long attacks against biblical credibility, the Bible has fared quite well. And, though it is not within the purview of this brief article to enumerate each of them, there are impressive evidences for the integrity of the Christian system (see Geisler, 1976; Wharton, 1977)

While we can, and should, discuss the differences between Islam and Christianity, and debate with Muslims regarding the inspiration of the Qur'an, encountering Muslims at this level most likely will produce little evangelistic progress. First we must extend the love of Christ to Muslims in concrete ways. Once they have seen tangible evidence of the risen Lord within our lives, we will be in a better position to discuss these more technical, yet vital, issues.

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