

Concept of God in Islam and Christianity

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SUMMARY

Do Muslims, Jews, and Christians worship the same God? Dr. Craig explains the essential differences between the Islamic and Christian conceptions of God.

CONCEPT OF GOD IN ISLAM AND CHRISTIANITY

My interest in Islam was quickened by my study of the history of the cosmological argument for a personal creator of the universe. Early Christian commentators on Aristotle living in Alexandria, Egypt, developed this argument in response to Aristotle's doctrine of the eternity of the world. They sought to show that the universe had a beginning and was brought into being by a transcendent creator.

When Islam swept across North Africa in the eighth century, this argument was taken up into Islamic theology and developed during the Middle Ages to a high degree of sophistication. Because of the contribution of Islamic thinkers to this argument, I dubbed it the kalam cosmological argument, the word "kalam" being the Arabic word for Islamic theology. I believe that this is a sound argument for God's existence, and it has served me well in reaching out to Muslims with the gospel.

My interest in Islamic theology thus quickened, when I did my doctorate in theology at the University of Munich in Germany, I chose Islam as one of my side areas of specialization. I never dreamt at that time that this might someday become a topic of interest to popular audiences.

With the attacks of 9/11, Islam suddenly burst into public consciousness in the West, and its profile has risen with each passing year, as Islamic terrorism has spread across the world. This heightened awareness of Islam has piqued people's interest in Islam and given me the opportunity to speak about the commonalities and contrasts between Islam and Christianity. Today I've been asked to speak about the concept of God in Islam and Christianity.

The question which drives our inquiry is not merely one of comparative religion; rather it is whether the Christian or Muslim concept of God is true. In our day of religious relativism, such a question is incredibly politically incorrect. *All* religions are supposed to be equally true, right? So what's the fuss all about?

Well, the answer to that question, it seems to me, is that religious relativism, which is almost

unthinkingly accepted by many people today, is simply not true. In fact, religious relativism is logically incoherent and so *cannot* be true. For the world's religions conceive of God, or gods, in so many contradictory ways that they cannot *all* be true. In particular, the concept of God in Islam and Christianity is so different that both religions cannot be right. Islam and Christianity have different doctrines or teachings concerning what God is like. For example, Christians believe that God is tri-personal, that there are in the one God three persons whom we call the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Muslims deny this doctrine or teaching. They believe that God is a single person. We cannot *both* be right. We could both be *wrong*—maybe it's the Buddhists who are right and God is impersonal—but we cannot both be *correct*. Therefore, part of the job of evaluating the competing claims of Islam and Christianity will be assessing their differing concepts of God.

Accordingly, in this morning's talk I want, first, to look at the principal Islamic critique of the Christian conception of God, and then, second, to examine critically the Muslim concept of God, with a view toward determining its adequacy.

So let's look first at the Christian concept of God and ask why Muslims find it rationally objectionable. Christians believe that God is an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-holy, eternal, spiritual Being who created the universe. Muslims agree with all these attributes (or properties) of God. This isn't surprising, since Islam, historically speaking, is an off-shoot of the Judaeo-Christian religious tradition. So our understanding of what God is like is in many respects the same.

But the major objection lodged by Islam against the Christian concept of God concerns the doctrine of the Trinity. In particular Christians believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and shares the same divine nature with God the Father. Muslims reject this doctrine because they believe that it commits the sin they call *shirk*, which is the sin of associating anything with God. Since God is thought to be incomparable or without peer, He cannot have a Son, as Christians claim. Thus, the Qur'an denounces anyone who holds that God has a Son as "an unbeliever" and consigns him to hellfire for such a blasphemous assertion. The Qur'an states: "They are unbelievers who say, 'God is the Messiah, Mary's son' Surely, whoever associates anything with God, God shall prohibit him entrance to Paradise and his home shall be the Fire. None shall help the evil-doers" (5.73).

Unfortunately the Qur'an's denunciation of the doctrine of the Trinity seems to be based on a gross misunderstanding of that doctrine. First, a bit of history here: Early Christian creeds had adopted the language of speaking of Mary as "the Mother of God" because she bore Jesus Christ. Now to someone not familiar with the theology of the early Church Fathers, such an expression as "the Mother of God" is almost guaranteed to be misleading. What the Church Fathers meant is that the person whose human nature Mary bore is a divine person. Mary did not give birth to the divine

nature of Christ; nevertheless, Mary could be called the Mother of God, since Christ, whose human nature she bore, was a divine person.

But Mohammed evidently thought that Christians believed in a Trinity composed of God the Father, Mary, and their offspring Jesus. It's no wonder that he regarded such a ridiculous doctrine as blasphemous! Mohammed's misunderstanding of the Trinity is evident in passages such as the following found in the Qur'an:

God will say: 'Jesus Son of Mary, did you ever say to mankind: "Worship me and my mother as gods besides God?"'

'Glory be to you,' he will answer, 'I could never have claimed what I have no right to.' (5.117)

The Creator of the heavens and the earth—how should he have a son, seeing that He has no consort, and He created all things . . . ? (6.102)

The doctrine that Mohammed rejected, namely, that God the Father should consort with a human female to sire a son and these three should then be worshiped as gods, would be rejected by any Christian.

According to the Bible, Jesus is called God's Son because he had no human father, but was miraculously conceived of a virgin. In the Gospel according to Luke, the angel says to Mary, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and God's power will rest upon you. For this reason the holy child will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1.35 TEV). What makes this ironic is that the Qur'an *affirms* the virgin birth of Jesus! In the Qur'anic account the angel says, "I am but a messenger of your Lord and have come to give you a *holy son*." Mary answers, "How shall I bear a son when I have neither been touched by any man nor ever been unchaste?" The angel replies, "Thus did your Lord speak. That is easy enough for me Our decree shall come to pass." (19.20-22). Whereupon Mary conceives Jesus. Thus, no Muslim should object to calling Jesus God's Son in the sense of his being miraculously conceived.

So if the doctrine of the Trinity is not the caricature rightly rejected by Mohammed, what is it? It is the doctrine that God is tri-personal. It is not the self-contradictory assertion that three Gods are one God, nor again that three persons are one person. That's just illogical nonsense. Rather it is the claim that the one entity we call God comprises three persons. That is no more illogical than saying that one geometrical figure we call a triangle is comprised of three angles. Three angles in one figure; three persons in one being!

Perhaps the best way to think of this is to say that in God there are three centers of self-

consciousness. I am a being with a single center of self-consciousness. God is a being with three centers of self-consciousness. Each of these three persons is equal in glory and divinity; but we call them "Father," "Son," and "Holy Spirit" because of the different roles they place in relation to us. The Father is the person who sends the Son to Earth; the Son is the person who takes a human nature and becomes incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth; the Holy Spirit is the person who stands in Christ's place until Christ returns.

Although this doctrine may seem strange to Muslims, once it's properly stated, there's nothing rationally objectionable about it. It is a logically consistent doctrine and seems rationally unobjectionable.

In fact, I'd like to finish out my first point by offering an argument for why it's plausible to think that God *is* a Trinity. To begin with, God is by definition the greatest conceivable being. If you could conceive of anything greater than God, then *that* would be God! Every Muslim who dies with the cry "*Allahu akbar!*" on his lips agrees with this point: God is the greatest being conceivable.

Now as the greatest conceivable being, God must be perfect. If there were any imperfection in God, then He would not be the greatest conceivable being. Now a perfect being must be a loving being. For love is a moral perfection; it is better for a person to be loving rather than unloving. God therefore must be a perfectly loving being.

Now it is of the very nature of love to give oneself away. Love reaches out to another person rather than centering wholly in oneself. So if God is perfectly loving by His very nature, He must be giving Himself in love to another. But who is that other? It cannot be any created person, since creation is a result of God's free will, not a result of His nature. It belongs to God's very essence to love, but it does not belong to His essence to create anything. God is necessarily loving, but He is not necessarily creating. So we can imagine a possible world in which God is perfectly loving and yet no created persons exist. So created persons cannot be the sufficient explanation of whom God loves. Moreover, science tells us that created persons have not always existed. But God is eternally loving. So again created persons alone are insufficient to account for God's being perfectly loving. It therefore follows that the other to whom God's love is necessarily directed must be internal to God Himself.

In other words, God is not a single, isolated person, as Islam holds; rather God is a plurality of persons, as the Christian doctrine of the Trinity holds. On the Islamic view God is a person who does not give Himself away essentially in love for another; He is focused essentially only on Himself. Hence, He cannot be the most perfect being. But on the Christian view, God is a triad of persons in eternal, self-giving love relationships. Thus, since God is essentially loving, the doctrine

of the Trinity is more plausible than any unitarian doctrine of God such as Islam. Why? Because God is by nature a perfect Being of self-giving love.

In summary of my first point, then, we've seen that the classic Muslim rejection of the Christian concept of God is based on a drastic misunderstanding of the doctrine of the Trinity, and that once that doctrine is properly understood, it is not only rationally unobjectionable, but quite plausible as well. Therefore, the Christian concept of God is rationally unobjectionable.

That brings us to my second point, that the Muslim concept of God is rationally objectionable. Now in claiming this, I'm not trying to put anybody down or attack someone personally. I'm just saying that it seems to me that the Islamic conception of God has real problems which render it rationally objectionable. Let me share just one of those deficits, namely:

Islam has a morally deficient concept of God.

We've seen that Muslims and Christians agree that God by definition is the greatest conceivable being and that besides being all-powerful, all-knowing, all-present, and so forth, the greatest conceivable being must also be morally perfect. That means that God must be a loving and gracious being. Therefore, God, as the perfect being, must be all-loving.

And this is exactly what the Bible affirms. The Bible says,

God is love, . . . In this is love, not that we loved God but that He loved us and sent His son to be the sacrifice for our sins (I John 4.8, 10).

Or again it says,

God shows His love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us (Romans 5.8).

Jesus taught God's unconditional love for sinners. We see this in his parables about the prodigal son and the lost sheep, in his practice of table fellowship with the immoral and unclean, and in his sayings like those of the Sermon on the Mount. He said, for example,

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends his rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, . . . what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 5.43-48)

The love of the Heavenly Father is impartial, universal, and unconditional.

What a contrast with the God of the Quran! What I'm going to tell you now is something that you will never hear in the media or from our public officials, for they dare not say such things. They cannot risk alienating hundreds of millions of Muslims by saying anything critical of Islam. But honesty compels me to say candidly and without rancor that the God of the Qur'an is not the loving God revealed by Jesus. According to the Quran, God does *not* love sinners. This fact is emphasized repeatedly and consistently like a drumbeat throughout the pages of the Qur'an. Just listen to the following passages:

"God loves not the unbelievers" (III.33)

"God loves not the impious and sinners" (II.277)

"God loves not evildoers" (III. 58)

"God loves not the proud" (IV. 37)

"God loves not transgressors" (V. 88)

"God loves not the prodigal" (VI. 142)

"God loves not the treacherous" (VIII.59)

"God is an enemy to unbelievers" (II. 99)

Over and over again the Qur'an declares that God does not love the very people whom the Bible says God loves so much that He sent His Son to die for them!

Now this may seem paradoxical in light of the Qur'an's calling God "*al-Rahman al-Rahim*"--the All-Merciful--until you realize that according to the Qur'an what God's mercy really cashes out to is that if you believe and do righteous deeds, then God can be counted on to give you what you have earned, plus a bonus. Thus, the Quran promises,

Work and God will surely see your work. (9. 105)

Every soul shall be paid in full for what it has earned. (2. 282)

Those who believe and do deeds of righteousness and perform the prayer and pay the alms--their wage awaits them with the Lord. (2. 278)

According to the Qur'an God's love is thus reserved only for those who earn it. It says,

To those who believe and do righteousness, God will assign love. (19. 97).

So the Qur'an assures us of God's love for the God-fearing and the good-doers; but He has no love for sinners and unbelievers. Thus, in the Islamic conception, God is not all-loving. His love is partial and has to be earned. The Muslim God only loves those who first love Him. His love thus rises no higher than the love which Jesus said even tax-collectors and unbelievers exhibit.

Now don't you think this is an inadequate conception of God? What would you think of a parent who said to his children, "If you measure up to my standards and do as I say, then I will love you"? Some of you have had parents like that, who didn't love you unconditionally, and you know the emotional scars you bear as a result. As the greatest conceivable being, the most perfect being, the source of all goodness and love, God's love must be unconditional and impartial. Therefore, the Islamic conception of God seems to me to be morally deficient. I therefore cannot rationally accept it.

Undoubtedly, this difference between Jesus' Heavenly Father and the God of Mohammed is most clearly exhibited in the attitude we're commanded to have toward non-believers. Jesus said that we should love unbelievers, just as God does, even if they are our enemies. Mohammed's attitude and teaching were quite different. Early on in his career, when he himself was in the persecuted minority, Mohammed had a very positive attitude toward Jews and Christians, whom he called the "People of the Book" because of their adherence to the Bible. He believed that once the Jews understood his message, they would willingly convert to Islam. Passages in the Quran from this early period of Mohammed's life are quite positive toward Jews and Christians.

But when the Jews did not convert, but opposed Mohammed, he became increasingly embittered against them. As Mohammed acquired political and military strength, the persecuted prophet changed to the ruthless politician. He began to have the Jews in Medina, where his base of operations was, either killed or dispossessed. In the year 627, after an unsuccessful attack on Medina by the Arab army from Mecca, Mohammad rounded up hundreds of Jewish families in Medina. 700 Jewish men were put to the sword, and Mohammad had their wives and children sold into slavery.

Mohammad realized that in order to unify the fractious Arab tribes, outward expansion was necessary. So he turned his eyes toward Syria and Iraq as obvious targets. At this time he lifted all protection from pagans. Unless they submitted to Islam, they were to be exterminated. The ninth chapter of the Quran comes from this period of Mohammad's life. It states that for four months pagan idolaters shall be left alone unmolested. Then comes this chilling command: "When the

sacred months are past, kill the idolaters wherever you find them. Arrest them, besiege them, and lie in ambush everywhere for them. [But] If they repent and take to prayer and render the alms levy, allow them to go their way . . . they are your brothers in the Faith” (9.5, 11). Not only pagans, but even Jews and Christians, the once respected People of the Book, now also came under Mohammad’s ban. Unless they submitted, they were likewise to be eliminated. Chapter 9 goes on to command Muslims: “Fight those from among the People of the Book who . . . do not embrace the true Faith until they pay tribute out of their own hand and are utterly subdued” (9.29). This chapter goes on to rebuke in the harshest terms any Muslim who refuses to go forth to fight: God will punish him and replace him with others (9.38-39). Muslims who refuse to fight will be smitten by God, either directly or — ominously—at the hands of faithful Muslims who do fight (9.52) “Wait if you will,” the hesitant are told, “We too are waiting.” But those who go forth in God’s holy war are promised either victory or martyrdom (9.52). Those who die in God’s cause are promised a Paradise of sensual delights: green gardens with flowing waters, silk couches, abundant wine, and voluptuous, dark-eyed virgins for their pleasure.

These are the last commands in the Qur’an with respect to unbelievers. Mohammad died shortly thereafter in 632 with plans before him for the attacks on neighboring nations. His successors carried out those attacks. In 633 the armies of Islam took Persia; in 635 Damascus fell; in 638 Jerusalem succumbed; in 640 Egypt was taken, and so on, right across North Africa to the Atlantic Coast.

We in the West with our democratic, liberal values tend to think that every religion surely shares our values. American officials have repeatedly said that we should not refer to the terrorists as “Islamic fundamentalists” because they are murderers, and no major religion advocates murder. I wonder if these officials have ever read the ninth chapter of the Qur’an. The truth of the matter is Islam is a religion which enjoins violence and which, historically, has been propagated by violence.

Contrary to what you hear tirelessly repeated in the media, the word “Islam” does not mean “peace.” That claim is simply linguistically false. “Islam” is the Arabic word for submission or surrender. That is what Muslims are called upon to do: to surrender everything to God. Thus, contrary to Western ways of thinking, *Islam is not a church*. It is crucial that we understand this. Islam is a total way of life: *everything* is to be submitted to God: the government, the economy, social mores, every aspect of society is submitted to God. Islam is thus all-consuming. The Western idea of separation of church and state is meaningless in Islam. For everything is to be submitted to God.

What this means is that it is really the so-called moderate Arab states like Egypt and Turkey, where you have a secular government distinct from Islamic law, in effect a separation of church

and state, which are the ones who act inconsistently with Islam. They have adopted a Western model of governance, a separation of church and state, which is fundamentally incompatible with Islam. And that's why Islamic fundamentalists hate these moderate Arab regimes and want to overthrow them. The fundamentalists understand more accurately the true nature of Islam.

But of course our public officials dare not say such a thing. We need the support of these moderate Arab states if our war against terrorism is to succeed. Therefore, moderate Muslims must be courted and reassured. And thus we get all these politically correct, revisionist statements in the media that Islam means peace, that Muslims only fight in self-defense not aggression, that Islam condemns violence, and so forth. All of this is politically motivated revisionism which betrays the true character of Islam.

This is not to say that Islam sanctions all of the atrocities perpetrated by groups like ISIL. I am not aware of anything in the Qur'an or in Sharia law that would sanction the rape of women or the execution of children in the name of Allah. Nor am I saying that Muslims are violent people. I'm talking about theology, not people. We can be thankful that the vast majority of Muslims are not fundamentalists, but are nominal Muslims, whose lives are far better than their theology. Indeed, they may know very little about Islamic theology. Asking a nominal Muslim what Islam teaches is rather like asking a nominal Catholic or Episcopalian what Christianity teaches!

So I trust you can see how absurd is the claim that the God of Mohammed is the Father of Jesus Christ. The Father of Jesus Christ loves sinners and commands us to love even our enemies, not to mention our neighbor. The God of Mohammad loves only those who love him, and he is an enemy to unbelievers. His followers are commanded to hunt down and kill unbelievers unless and until they submit. The God of the Qur'an is a defamation of the Heavenly Father proclaimed and revealed by Jesus.

To wrap up, then, we've seen, first, that the Christian concept of God as a Trinity is rationally unobjectionable and, second, that the Muslim concept of God is, by contrast, rationally objectionable because the God of Islam is morally deficient and therefore not the greatest conceivable being. As one theologian has rightly exclaimed, "Thank God for God!"