

Why I am a Christian and not a Muslim

There are three reasons why the author is a Christian and why he feels he made the right choice. These are rooted in the first book of the Bible and traceable throughout its entirety. The essential issue in this all-important subject revolves around our God concept, our Christ concept and our human concept. Although the three are alluded to in Islam they are radically different from what God has revealed in the Bible.

As a young person growing up in Western Canada, at first I did not give this topic much thought or consideration. I was born and raised in a Christian home and came to personal faith when I was seven years old. Later, in college I sort of turned around and examined my faith: Why am I *really* a Christian? Still later, at the age of 24, I went to Pakistan and spent 23 years as a missionary in a country where 97% of the people are Muslim—mostly of the Sunni sect. I was challenged on many, many occasions as to the truth of my claims about Christianity and there were those who thought that I would eventually become a Muslim. Added to this, I have done further study on Islam, and written a Ph. D. dissertation on Islamic fundamentalism in Pakistan. Therefore, I feel that I have had ample opportunity to examine my faith, especially in relation to Islam.

Nevertheless, though I have studied both faiths, and will continue to do so, I admit that I do not have all the answers. Yet I do feel obligated to write candidly—albeit kindly as I compare and contrast Christianity with Islam. And I stand corrected if I have misunderstood either Islam or Christianity.

In thinking about this subject, I recall what a man from North Africa with Berber blood in him, St. Augustine, said a few hundred years after the Prophet Jesus: "Thou hast formed us for Thyself and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in Thee." I also think of a well-known Christian confession that says, "The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever."

So Christians conclude that the only real satisfaction comes from knowing God because apparently we have been created with a God-shaped vacuum. But it seems to me that many people in the world only know God by hearsay and never really give him much thought. He is no more than an inference or a deduction. For many, he is "there" but not dynamically "here," and in that bracket I include many people in the United States as well as other parts of the world. "He must be," they say, "so we believe in him."

Finally, I could not help but wonder that perhaps even few Christians really thirst and hunger for God. In contrast to the neglect and ignorance of God that is often true in the modern world, I read in the Bible of some who longed to know God, to commune with God and to worship God.

For example, the Prophet Moses said, "If I have found favor in your eyes, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favor with you" (Exodus 33:13). The Prophet David said, "Taste and see that the Lord is good" (Psalms 34:8).

The Prophet Jesus said, "Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God" (Matt. 5:8). And, at the very end of the *injeel* (New Testament), it says that 24 kingly elders fall on their faces to worship God, and they lay their crowns before him and say, "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and for your pleasure they are and were created" (Revelation 4:11).

Several years ago I saw a book, written by Bertrand Russell, *Why I am not a Christian*, but I confess that I didn't read it very carefully. The primary reason was that his picture on the back reflected a very unhappy person. I trust that I am happier at being a Christian than Russell was at *not* being a Christian! What follows therefore are three reasons why I chose to become a Christian and am still convinced I made the right choice.

These are rooted in the first book of the Bible and traceable all the way through. The following points reflect my thinking on this all-important subject.

The Character of God

Our relationship with God depends on what we think of him, that is, our "God concept." I start with this point because I believe it is God who wants most of all to have a relationship with us. The Bible says, "We love him because he first loved us." He took the initiative and I think we can all agree that God is the greatest Being in the universe: He is glorious, majestic, ruler and king; therefore, none of his subjects dare come into his presence without an invitation.

Moreover, etymologically (from a word study) the Muslim and Christian God are the same. Certain Qur'anic verses indicate this (Surah 22:40). I repeat, they are the same when you compare the origin of the words. "Allah" is linked to "El-Bethel" and "El-Elohim" in Hebrew and "Elah" in Aramaic. Allah is pre-Islamic as, for example, when the Prophet Muhammad's father was named Abd-Allah" (servant of Allah).

Yet, though the word for God in Islam and Christianity has common etymological roots, there are vast differences. One gets a "feel" for divine distinctiveness in Christianity from the very beginning of the Bible—not in reference to his power and sovereign rule so much—for that is also a Qur'anic emphasis, but in reference to his unconditional love.

In the Bible, humankind sinned and broke God's laws--still God searches for them. God takes the initiative: "Where are you?" And though he banishes them from the Garden, still he continues to love them and reveals a plan to restore the broken relationship. Great verses include: "God commends his love toward us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us"(Romans 5:8); "When we were still without strength, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:6); and "While we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son (Romans 5:10). One short verse sums it up: "God is love" (I John 4:8).

This unconditional love of God for the unlovable is evident throughout the Bible; for instance: "I have loved you with an everlasting love" (Jeremiah 31:3); but perhaps the greatest is the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15) which Jesus tells to show that God is like a father. The father does not disown him or send an army to force his return; rather, for the sake of a proper relationship he grieves, longs and even suffers with the boy until reconciliation takes place at the happy homecoming. At last the son in desperation repents, leaves his old lifestyle and returns, but he does so *only* because of the character and action of his father.

The father then welcomes his son with open arms because he wants to resume fellowship. That is what God is like in Christianity. The *taurat* says: "What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him?" (Deuteronomy 4:7).

But this does not imply that God is soft on sin. God is just and he has prepared hell for the wicked. Jesus described it as a place where "The worm does not die and the fire is not quenched" (Mark 9:48). In fact, the Bible ends with a description of the horrors of hell in very graphic terms: the "lake of fire prepared for the devil and his angels;" and a place that burns with "fire and brimstone."

The good news of course is that God says we do not have to go to hell; that he has provided a sure way of escape. It is through One who has taken our punishment. The sacrificial system that you trace through the *taurat*, the *zabur* (Psalms) and other parts of the Bible is that God called for a substitute but that one day he would himself provide a perfect and sinless substitute who would be the final sacrifice. He would die for us and then rise from the dead. Jesus fulfilled that promise.

Some years ago, a scholarly Pakistani Muslim, Daud Rahbar wrote a Ph. D. dissertation: "*God of Justice: a Study in the Ethical Doctrine of the Qur'an*," and came to the conclusion that the only way God could be both merciful and just was through the cross. That is the solution to the problem. Rahbar later became a Christian and taught in the United States.

Conversely, and here I stand corrected if wrong, I believe that although God is loving in Islam (one name is *al-vadud*) he does not love the sinner: "Say: 'If you love God, follow me, and God will love you, and forgive you your sins ... God loves not the unbelievers'" (Surah3:29). Also, "God loves the god-fearing" (Surah 3:70). And, "God loves not the traitor" (4:107). And, although he is merciful, it is the mercy of a king--not the compassion of a father that we just heard about in Luke 15.

Although every *surah* (chapter) in the Qur'an, except the ninth, starts with "*Bis milla ur-Rahman ur Rahim*" ("In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate"), God's mercy is submerged in his sovereign power. I therefore conclude that love in Islam is reciprocal and that in a true sense a Muslim cannot say "God is love." In Islam God is all-powerful, but distant, not personally involved with people. Essentially, Allah says, "Some to heaven, some to hell and I care not." Heaven depends on a divine fiat.

Admittedly, Islam urges repentance, but the supreme will of God is far above the repentance of any individual. God forgives whomever he will and does not always distinguish between "big sins" and "little sins" (Surah 18:47). It is the absolute will of Allah to pardon whomever he will and condemn whomever he will. So who then can escape?

Accordingly, one Muslim wrote that he became very fearful when he read: "Not one of you there is, but shall go down to it; that for thy Lord is a thing decreed, determined" (Surah 19:72). Then came another blow: "Had thy Lord willed, He would have made mankind one nation; but they continue in their differences excepting those on whom thy Lord has mercy. To that end He created them, and perfectly is fulfilled the word of thy Lord: 'I shall assuredly fill Gehenna with jinn and men all together'" (Surah 11:120). This Muslim believer realized he had no hope of salvation and his despair deepened when he read the tradition, written by Ibn Masud, who quoted the Prophet Muhammad: "Every one shall enter hell. Afterwards they will come out of it, sooner or later, according to their works. Those who will come out first will do then like a horse at full speed, afterwards like a swift rider, then like a man springing, and finally, like the walk of a man. Tirmizi and Darimi have handed down this Tradition" (The Moslem World, 18, no. 2 April, 1928).

Hence, apparently in Islam God is not delighted by obedience, nor displeased by sins, nor merciful to the believer, nor disgusted with the forgetful, nor hostile to the arrogant. He is above all associations. In contrast the Christian God cares. His judgments are holy, just and good--not arbitrary, whimsical or capricious.

Thomas Merton, a famous Christian convert, turned from Marxism, depression and hopelessness when he read a book on the philosophy of God. It revolutionized him for he saw that God was near, accessible, close at hand and immediate. He could be reached. In contrast, Muslims search for him but he seems unreachable.

A Muslim lady I know of in Pakistan was told by a Christian to pray to God as a friend and father. She said: "I got on my knees and tried but it seemed ridiculous and I could not bring myself to do it. I thought, 'Isn't it sin to try to bring the 'Great One' to our level?'" I fell asleep more confused than ever and awoke to remember it was my birthday. I said, 'Suppose I do call Him father.' Shaking with excitement, I fell to my knees, looked up and said, 'My father.' I was not prepared for what happened! I spoke His name aloud and something broke through and I found myself knowing he had heard me. The room was no longer empty for I sensed his presence."

Who I am

Our relationship with God depends on what we think about ourselves; it depends on our “human concept.” I have already alluded to this in the first point but in Christianity we know that humankind is soundly indicted for not only sinful deeds, but for inherent sin—original sin. Humankind is intrinsically evil and this includes all of us, not just Muslims. The Bible says, "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). It says, "There is none righteous, no not one" (Romans 3:10).

It started in the Garden and after an act of disobedience, God says to Adam and to Eve: "You have sinned." There was no getting around it. The *injeel* explains, "Sin entered into the world by one man and thereby passed to all men because all have sinned" (Romans 5:12). That is a damning and condemning statement but an accurate picture of how Christians understand the root of the sin problem.

However, God does not leave us there. He says to the sinner: "Your evil nature is perpetuated by deliberate rebellion and you can do nothing to remove the guilt and shame in my eyes. You are damned to eternal punishment so turn to me and trust me for salvation through Christ. I will enable you to make a new start." Again, in my opinion Islam falls short here in that it does not adequately deal with the sin problem. "Salvation" is a rare word in Islam (only appears once, Surah 40:41) because humankind is not fallen, there is no moral decline, and there is no doctrine of original sin.

Admittedly, the Qur'an says, surely he [man] is sinful, very foolish" (Surah 33:72); and, "Man waxes insolent, for he thinks himself self-sufficient" (Surah 96:6). But it seems to excuse him: "Adam forgot" (Surah 20:114); and, "Adam disobeyed his Lord ..." but God forgave him." It says "Satan made them slip" (Surah 2:34).

Islam says man is weak and needs guidance: "God is He that created you of weakness, then He appointed after weakness strength, then after strength He appointed weakness and gray hairs; He creates what He will, and He is the All-knowing, the All-powerful" (Surah 30:54).

Here we have what I feel, is one of the main reasons why Islam puts so much emphasis on the *shariah* (Islamic law)—the essence of Islam. However, there is a problem with a society that thinks if it only has the right law, it can create heaven on earth. The trouble is good laws can be—and often are—turned into instruments of injustice. Human societies can never be perfect for, according to the Bible, law is “weakened by sin” (Romans 8:3); law cannot by itself produce the obedience God demands.

At various periods Christians have tried to establish religious states based on the Bible, but they have all disappeared. In many ways the *shariah* is good—as was the Torah of Moses—but the Bible says the Torah was given—not to make men good—but to prove their sinfulness and need of a Savior, to lead them to Christ—the Savior. It was to expose their helpless condition so they would turn to Christ for salvation.

John Bunyan, author of *Pilgrim's Progress* said: "Run, run the law commands, but gives me neither feet nor hands; Tis better news the gospel brings: It bids me fly; it gives me wings." So, any attempt to establish a social and political order outside of Jesus Christ as head is mutinous. It is open rebellion against the will of God. I emphasize that I am not defending western imperialism; I am defending the gospel of Christ. I also realize that for the most part the West has rejected the kingdom of Jesus Christ; nevertheless, he will return and set up his kingdom based on truth, justice and righteousness.

Furthermore, Islam fails to adequately account for the moral degradation, vileness, indescribable cruelty, inhumanity, wars and terrible crime that plague our world. The problem is more serious than that. If Jesus said to one of the most religious men in the Bible, "You must be born again" (John 3), what about the rest of us?

In January 27, 1995, I was up in Vancouver, Canada, and while there remembered with the rest of the world that on in 1945, exactly 50 years before, the survivors of a death camp, Auschwitz in Poland were delivered by Soviet troops. Of the approximately one and a half million prisoners who passed through there, 65,000 remained alive in 1945. Most only left some hair and the smell of their burning bodies. One Soviet soldier said that what shocked him most were the children--some mere infants.

They were survivors of the medical experiments of the camp doctor, Josef Mengele. The Soviet soldier simply could not understand it. If you did not believe in the depravity of man before how could you now deny it? Other tragedies, like the terrible slaughter on the Indian subcontinent in 1947, may be less dramatic, but further proves my point that sin is a terrible disease. Therefore, what I see in Islam is an inadequate analysis of human sin and the Qur'an seems to vacillate on it because it says that "most go astray."

Basically, it seems Islam is too optimistic of the real condition and therefore offers a less than satisfactory solution to the dilemma. For example, a Muslim girl 20 years old wrote to the editor of a Muslim newspaper and said she felt trapped by sin and wondered what she could do. He replied that she should get a hold of herself, turn over a new leaf, but he offered no external help. In other words, Islam can only offer law--not redeeming grace.

Who Jesus Is

Our relationship with God depends on who we think Jesus Christ is; it depends on our "Christ concept." In Genesis we may remember that after the damning evidence was presented and the guilty verdict was pronounced, God immediately went to work. He said, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers" (Genesis3:15).

Christians believe this is the first promise of Christ--but not the last. All the way through those many books written over several hundred years by numerous authors, the promise is repeated: "he is coming, he is coming, he is coming." And, when Jesus Christ finally does come, he is an unusual person. He is born of a virgin (both holy books mention this); he is without sin, and he does miracles.

But the incomparable moral beauty of Christ is most astounding (again both mention this). Once he said, "Can any of you prove me guilty of sin?" (John 3:46). The Qur'an says of Christ, "A man without fault" (Surah 19:19). This is in contrast to other prophets, "Nothing else they said, but "Lord, forgive us our sins, that we exceeded in our affair, and make firm our feet, and help us against the people of the unbelievers" (Surah 3:141).

The Arabian Prophet says of himself in a Surah named after him, "Know thou therefore that there is no god but God, and ask forgiveness for thy sin, and for the believers, men and women" (Surah 47:19). Also, "Surely We have given thee thy former and thy latter sins" (Surah 48:2). Additionally, Jesus claimed to be both God and man (Philippians 2). So, in Christianity God does not just reveal his will--He reveals himself.

We might well wonder why God chose this way and I think a recent book by Robert Gales on communication helps to explain why. In the book, *You are the Message*, the author concludes that a person is himself or herself the message. That is why Jesus Christ came, in order for God to fully communicate himself. Christians claim that this was the only way the sin problem could be taken care of. He (Jesus) was the only sinless one, the perfect representative who paid the penalty of death for us on the cross as it was predicted long before.

In Islam by comparison, God also forgives but what bothers me is *how* he forgives. He forgives arbitrarily, whimsically—almost irresponsibly. He does it by a mere word. Divine forgiveness can never be just an amnesty as if it does not really matter .

In Christianity, forgiveness involves sacrifice and suffering. Jesus Christ is the "Lamb of God" who dies for the sin of the world and then even overcomes death. As a result of that finished work, he cleanses the sinner from all shame and guilt (Romans 8). Hence, to refuse the cross is a dishonor to the generosity of God; it is a dishonor of his grace. It is to rebel against his kingly will.

I remember what a Muslim from a remote Pakistani village said years ago: "Your prophet is superior to our Prophet for three reasons: He was born of a virgin; ours was not. He did miracles; in fact, he did them from birth and was a prophet from birth; ours became a prophet at age 40. Your Prophet is alive; ours is dead" (Surah 4:15 speaks of Prophets who were slain, but does not say they rose from the dead).

So when the Bible says Jesus is a Savior it means exactly that. He gives hope because we know that we are weak and unable on our own to please God. In ancient times, a Stoic philosopher by the name of Seneca said, "Wicked we are, wicked we have become, and, I regret to add, wicked we will

Jesus said to the thief on the cross, crucified next to him, "Today, you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). The Bible teaches that Christ delivers from both the penalty and the power of sin (Romans 6:11-14).

Our identification with Christ is so great we "die to sin," that is our identity with him frees us from sin's bondage. And, as he rose from the dead, we too are raised to newness of life. Now we have the Spirit of God within to help us to please God.

A new convert to Islam told of her frustration to fellow-Muslims in a computer bulletin board message. She said, "I've been a Muslim for about 4 years. Islam is a difficult road for me to walk, but I believe with all my heart that I'm doing the right thing. ... I want be a Muslim forever, but I feel there is so much to do in Islam ... sometimes I think I'm going crazy trying to remember all this...I want to be a good servant to Allah but learning all this is too much for me. I've talked to my husband and he thinks I have a jinn [evil spirit].... I am desperately looking for answers that will help me to be successful in my effort."

Finally, I recall that after a few Muslim friends had read in the *hadith* (Traditions) that Muhammad could not guarantee salvation for his own daughter, they asked a disturbing question: "If the Prophet said he could not even save his own daughter Fatimah how do we know he can save us?" (*al-Bukhari*, vol. 6, p. 277.) Others were troubled by the call to prayer that echoes five times a day from mosques equipped with loud speakers: "Come to success, come to salvation"--when they themselves had no assurance of salvation.

In response to all such questions, some in desperation have turned to Christ and found hope from the *injeel* and the words of Jesus, "I am the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6). Many Muslims have also found great comfort from the words of Jesus: "Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

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