A Brief Guide to the Study of Islam: Anthropology and Soteriology

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I. Forward

This brief paper is part of an overall introduction to Islamic beliefs. I have tried to indicate both relevant verses of the Quran, and technical terms, so that the interested reader can pursue further research on his or her own. A bibliography at the end indicates some of the English language works which will give a greater insight into these areas of Islamic belief.

Readers wishing to do further research should note that Arabic has been romanized in different ways in this century, and that some texts and reference works are keyed to the Persian or even Urdu equivalents of Arabic terms. Leaving aside the most extreme variations it should be noted that words in this paper beginning with "j" is often found with "dj", and that "q" is often rendered "k", and visa versa. Thus *qadar* may be found as *kadar*, and *Jinn* as *Djinn.* Names, such as Ash'ari, are sometimes written with "al" as a prefix, thus *Al Ash'ari.* Translations of the Quran (*Koran*) sometimes have variations in the numbering of the chapters and verses. Normally if the verse being sought isn't found one should check the same verse, and its immediate neighbors, in the previous and subsequent chapter.

In this paper I have referred to God as God, whether in a Islamic or Christian context. The usual Islamic word for God, Allah, is used only when necessary to clearly distinguish a Muslim usage. As is always the case with translation a certain controversy surrounds the use of these terms. There are those who maintain that the English word "God" has theological overtones from Christian culture which do not make it an appropriate translation for the word "Allah". However, numerous English works by Muslim authors freely use God as the equivalent for Allah, and I have followed this pattern.

II. Introduction

Questions about human nature and destiny appeared among humans at almost the dawn of civilization, and may be definitive of humanity itself. However, the universality of these questions should not blind us to the fact that they have been formulated in very different ways by different cultures and different religions. In Christianity and Islam there is the shared assumption that both the nature and destiny of humanity are found in the purposes of God. Both Christianity and Islam place the question of humanity in its relationship to the one transcendent God at the center of religion. And both see that relationship as problematic. Yet profound differences arise between them.

For the Christian religious tradition that problematic relationship arises when humanity grasps for itself the prerogatives of God. The essence of idolatry is God *remade* in a human image, or something even lower, and is rooted in humanity's rebellion against God's command. In the Christian tradition the sin of humanity is more than just specific acts, it is a fundamental characteristic of humanity after the Fall, dominating the whole life of a humanity powerless to overcome it or deny it its bitter fruits of death and evil. The first followers of Jesus were anxiously awaiting a Messiah, a Savior who could deliver them from sin. The salvation which they awaited was conditioned by an extensive tradition of Jewish reflection on sin, on Israel's history, on the position of the individual, the nation, and the world in relation to God, and on God's plan for human history. Christian theology was determined by the ways in which Jewish hopes were met, redefined, and extended by the person of Jesus and the content of his preaching. The followers of Jesus discovered that the destiny of humanity is to be restored to full humanness by the eradication of sin and the re-establishment of God as God in human life through faith in Jesus as the Christ. Both the pervasiveness of sin, and the comprehensiveness of the grace required to destroy it, are reflected in the Christian theology of atonement through God's sacrifice of the Son, and the eschatological images of the Kingdom of God found at the center of the message of Jesus Christ. Jesus as the sinless man capable of making and being the sacrifice on the cross is also the image of authentic humanity, the new Adam. While the New Testament authors looked forward to both a day of judgement and a new creation by God, they asserted that the possibility of freedom from sin and authentic human life were instituted by the atonement, and the sending of the Holy Spirit to the church, the Body of Christ. Any Christian understanding of anthropology reckons with Jesus as the new Adam, the crucifixion of Christ on the cross which conquers the human fear of sin and death, the Spirit of Christ which makes his followers holy, and the nature of faith which makes it possible for humans to enjoy these gifts of God's mercy. Any Christian soteriology is rooted in God's own sacrifice of his Son on the cross to pay the price of sin, the Christian hope for eternal life, the strength of the Holy Spirit to persevere in the face of evil and temptation, and the promised reign of God.

In Islam the essential problematic of the human relationship with God arises when the first humans, tempted by the Devil (*Iblis*), grasp after the

created order as the ultimate reality, choosing the fruit of the tree rather than the command of God. As a result humans are exiled to the earth, away from the Garden which was to be their home and away from their stature as the highest of all creatures. As a conscious choice this sin of choosing the created order is infidelity to God's command, making a person a *kafir*. When reflected in the elevating of the created order to the status of God this is the sin of *shirk*. The human condition which makes such infidelity possible is ignorance, *jahiliyya*, a condition which becomes pervasive in some times and places but which is never a necessary part of human nature. Infidelity, idolatry, and ignorance were the primary characteristics which Muhammed found in his own time and culture. The first revelations which Muhammed received placed the reality of Allah, and Allah's judgement upon those who were idolatrous and unfaithful, powerfully before those who heard them. They called on people to know, and acknowledge, the one God, and to abandon immorality in order to be saved at the judgement day and to attain the lost Paradise. This called for repentance, a change of heart. Yet in Islam the human heart, which is the seat of knowing rather than feeling, is always an isthmus, *barzakh*, which separates, but also potentially joins, the earthly and the divine.[1] The fulfillment of human destiny which Muhammed announced was a return to the Garden and the resumption of the status which God originally intended for humanity. This occurs first with *Islam*, humans submitting to the perfect and final revelation of Allah and Allah's will which came through Muhammed. Ultimately it is realized when Allah destroys the Earth (which is not intrinsically corrupt, but has simply served its purpose) and after the final judgement brings all of those who have been faithful back into the Garden (which was always the destiny of humankind.) While it is by Allah's grace alone that humans are continually reminded of their nature and destiny through the prophets, and are called into Islam, it is up to each individual to make the choices which will lead them ultimately back to the Garden. (25:70).

It is too much to say of course, that Christianity and Islam were determined by their cultural and human contexts. Their founders not only answered, but helped define, the question of the nature and destiny of humanity. Both claim that revelation provides not just the answer to a generic human question, but frames that question properly in the face of human ignorance or sin. So it is important, as we look for shared experiences and categories of theological reflection which allow authentic dialogue, to realize that our Christian questions are not necessarily generic human questions. This may mean that we have no ready answer for the central concerns of our neighbors in a pluralistic society. And it may mean that we will discover in dialogue dimensions of human existence before God that our own particular tradition of Christian theological reflection has passed by.

III. The Creatures of Allah

Islamic accounts of the created order recognize several realms, each of which can be defined in terms of relation to its creator. The first two of realms are that of inanimate and animate creatures. The inanimate realm is governed with absolute consistency by natural law, which is nothing other than God's will for inanimate creation. Animate creatures such as animals live, breed, act, and react according to the traits of their distinctive species, as these have been determined by God. While their actions may appear irregular because they live in relation to a changing environment, they have no ability to reflect on their actions and no free will. Whether one regards a mineral being slowly compressed into a new form in the bowels of the earth, or a tree budding, or a wolf hunting, one sees the same thing: a creature carrying out unreflectively God's will. (87:2-3, 20:49-50, 17:44) Philosophers would subsequently debate whether God's will was innate in the creature, or represented God's immediate creation of all events as well as things. In either case the creature's submission to God's will was total.

The third and by far most important realm is that of humans, who are distinguished from other creatures by their ability to consciously grasp God's will and then choose to implement it or not. Again, philosophers and theologians would debate the relation of human freedom to divine power. Yet Islam always agreed that humans were responsible for their actions, and for implementing God's will, in a way that set them apart from all other creatures.

The forth and fifth realm consist of spiritual creatures, the *jinn* and *mala'ikah* (angels). Unlike humans, who were created of clay animated when God breathed his spirit into them, the *jinn* are created of fire and the angels of light (21:19 onward, 35, 55:15). Like humans these creatures are created to worship God through submission to God's will. Both the Quran and Muslim theologians have traditionally regarded the *jinn* as like humans in their ability to choose submission to God. Thus they have had their prophets and religions, and can be subject to God's punishment or converted to Islam. Despite injunctions in the Quran and Hadith (the collected sayings attributed to Muhammed) against pursuing relations with the *jinn,* Muslims have always been fascinated with them. Legal scholars worked out complete guidelines to relations between *jinn* and humans, and their existence is accepted by all Muslims.[2] The situation of angels is more complex. The Quran suggests that they are utterly submissive to God's will, and possess no freedom of choice. (21:19, 20, 27, 46:6). Yet the Quran also tells of the rebellion of the angel Iblis (2:34, 15:31, etc.). These accounts are complicated by the fact that Iblis seems also to be characterized as a *jinn* in the Quran. Despite controversies among commentators over the status of Iblis in relation to the impeccability of angels, belief in angels as impeccable servants of Allah is a fundamental belief for Muslims. The Quran names and defines the roles of many of the angels, and Islamic theological tradition, not to mention folklore, has a highly developed and complex angelology.

IV. Human Nature

The first revelation to Muhammed contained the central theme of subsequent Muslim reflection on humanity. "Recite, O man, whom Allah created from a blood clot". Humans are creatures, this first and foremost, and they are recipients of revelation from their creator, Allah. From this basic beginning Islamic reflections on human nature can be said to derive from four sources: the stories about Adam and Eve as they are found in the Quran and Arab traditions contemporary with the Quran, the life of Muhammed as it came to be told in the Muslim community, various statements and terms found in the Quran and Hadith, and Greek philosophy as understood and developed in Muslim circles. These are not necessarily integrated into a coherent anthropology, but present rather a spectrum of ideas which theologians and ordinary Muslims draw on in expressing their own understanding of humanity. The story of Adam and his companion Hawa speak primarily to the issue of God's purpose for humankind and its destiny. These stories relate to soteriology by placing humanity in a temporal framework whose beginning, descent from the Garden to earth, is complimented by its end, the restoration of the faithful to the Garden. The stories of Muhammed not only flesh out the details of an exemplary human life, they address through the concept of Prophethood the spiritual mystery of how a finite creature can be immutably linked with the transcendent God. They give a concrete basis for reflection on the quality of humanity which makes it possible to conceive of an eternity of perfect obedience and communion with God. Finally the Muslim discovery of Greek philosophy provided a detailed view of the metaphysical world which would and could stimulate mystical reflection on the path to oneness with God that complimented the temporal account of human ends. As importantly it provided the basis for an Islamic psychology which explains the human in relation to the divine mind on one hand, and in relation to other animate creatures on the other.

A. The Creation and Fall of Humankind

The earliest Muslim understanding of the human nature was based on the Quran, especially in its account of the creation of Adam and Eve (*Adam* and *Hawa*), a story which was current in Arabia in several elaborated forms, both Jewish and Christian. The Quranic story is distinctive in several respects. Adam is created in order to consciously and willingly worships God, not because God needs worship, but because this gives Adam his unique identity. Adam was the highest of all creatures. He possessed the knowledge of all things in creation (and hence the ability to name them, which the angels lacked). In recognition of this the Quran says that God required the angels to bow down to Adam, precipitating the rebellion of Iblis. Adam is also the first of the prophets (*nabi*), for he received the first revelation from God. Adam is called in the Quran *khalifah*, or vice-regent, meaning that it belongs to him and his progeny to both use creation for their benefit and to develop it according to God's will (2:30).

In some *hadith* Adam is said to be made "in the image of God". This has been suggestive for Muslims, especially for mystics, of the spiritual journey each person should undertake. Orthodox Muslim commentators are clear in saying that unlike God Adam has no creative power, only the power to submit to or to disrupt God's created order. Perhaps most critically Adam and his progeny are characterized with the term *fitrah*, a word which suggests that their whole being is in accord with God's creative purpose. Although there are differences of opinion among Muslim commentators as to the spiritual and legal implications of *fitrah*, all emphasize that humans are by nature capable of knowing and obeying the will of God. Indeed one Quranic verse (7:172), which also emphasizes human responsibility, states that God confronted all of the souls of all potential humans, and that they acknowledged Allah as their Creator, thus they have no excuse at the judgement for having failed to recognize him as such.

The story of the temptation of Adam and Eve in Paradise, and their subsequent eating of the forbidden fruit, is interpreted as a mistake (*dhanb*) in the Islamic tradition (2:35, 7:1-ff). Significantly when the pair is confronted by Allah they say, "We have wronged ourselves." (7:23) It is Iblis who bears responsibility for their loss of Paradise, while they suffer the consequence of their mistake by being cast down to the Earth. This leads to their punishment, and equally to their repentance, and then a more mature understanding of Allah as the ultimate reality. The event defines what Muslims see as the fundamental human fault, which is forgetting Allah's command. But while this forgetfulness is regarded as a universal human tendency, it is not the definitive human trait. It is human nature, encouraged by Allah's manifold signs in creation and the near endless succession of prophets, to remember (*dhikr)* that Allah has created everything and that every thing should bow before Allah.

B. Human Purpose

The word *Islam*, which means "to submit", reveals the central purpose of human life, which is to submit to the revealed purposes of the creator. This *Islam*, along with faith and works of righteousness, are the *din*, or religion in the broadest sense, of Muslims. While the exact meaning of *din* in the Quran is complex, and the subject of much discussion by commentators, more recent Muslim theologians have used it to mark the definitive difference between *Islam* and all other religions. They take *din* to indicate the absolute fullness of God's purpose for humans in the world. Thus *Islam* is *din*, a "way of life" which indicates everything from personal manners, to social interactions, to political systems, to international relations. It includes architecture and all of the arts as well, and ultimately embraces God's entire plan for the creation, so that it includes God's final judgement of humanity, one of the distinctive meanings of the word *din* as found in the Quran.

While this full elaboration of *Islam* as *din* belongs to our era, in which Islam defines itself over against the retreat of Christianity into a form of private piety in the face of secularization, it is justified historically. Very early on Muslims saw every choice in every situation as an opportunity to either submit to God's plan or abandon it. They sought guidance in the most minute and greatest of human affairs in the Quran and the traditions of the prophet, and later in the ever expanding body of *fikh* or Islamic law.[3]

While this traditional rules-based approach to Islam as a complete way of life continues to have a powerful attraction for Muslims, there has been a growing consensus that *ijtihad*, or the reasoning out of God's will in specific instances is necessary for any Muslim in a responsible decision making position. The challenge of *ijtihad*, as well as the desire to awaken Muslims to think more deeply about their religion, and the desire of Muslims to speak convincingly to a non-Muslim audience, have led to a great deal of modern discussion on the first principles of human responsibility in the Islamic *din*.

1. Ibadah

The Quran teaches that humans were made for *ibadah*, or conscious, intentional, worship of God (51:56). This is the active means by which humans fulfill their divinely given vocation. Formally this means carrying out the daily prayers prescribed in the Quran, observing the fasting month, making the pilgrimage to Mecca, and paying the *zakat* tax. It was also extended in early Islam to include personal prayers and other acts of conventional worship. Islamic reflection on the broader obligations of human beings has stressed that all conscious action should be seen as *ibadah*, and should be governed by reflection on God's laws, the intention to fulfill them, and action in bringing them to fulfillment.

2. Khalifa and Abd

A two terms *khalifah* and *abd,* or vice-regent and slave define two important understandings of the human relationship to the earth. This title *khalifah* was originally applied to Adam, as sovereign of the earth. It is taken by many Muslims as a broad description of humanity's specific relationship with the natural world. The Earth is given to humans for their free use according to the Quran. Yet the human's "highest achievement is to obey without question his Master's Will... so that the Divine Will may operate through him without impediment", so humans are also *abd.*[4] Islamic thinkers thus claim to have a tool for reflection on humans and the world which transcends a supposed western emphasis on domination and exploitation.

3. Ilm, Adl, Dawa, Jihad

Together *ibadah* and *khalifa* describe the human responsibility to God on one hand and the created order on the other. The Quran and Hadith also emphasize narrower goals of human life which in various ways have inspired Muslims. The search for *ilm*, or knowledge, is enjoined on all humans according to their capacity, and is clearly the antidote to the ignorance which is humankind's most besetting shortcoming. This quest for knowledge is first directed to religious knowledge. Yet it also includes knowledge of the natural world - which is regarded as a sign of Allah - and of the human/social world in which humans must strive to implement God's will. *Adl*, or justice, is also enjoined upon Muslims as an essential sign of God's intention for creation. *Da'wa*, or striving to both extend Islam and strengthen it from within, is part of the human vice-regency which seeks to bring all creatures into conformity with Allah's plan. *Jihad*, or struggle to defend Islam, is likewise part of this human obligation. This short list of principals of human has been extended as Muslims have, at different times, tried to answer the particular challenges facing themselves or their societies. Whether it is through extensive lawmaking or articulation of fundamental principles, Islam strives to guide every aspect of human life in the world and hereafter.

C. The Ideal Human

Adam and Eve are the prototypes of humanity, and the stories of their creation and life in the garden are reminders to Muslims of the glory of humanity intended by God. However, the world of Adam and Eve, however fully elucidated in myth and story, is necessarily distant from the personal and social reality of Muslims. Both, the Quran and the Hadith, as well as numerous subsequent traditions, point to Muhammed himself as the exemplar of human life (33:21, 68:4) And literature about the prophets life, *sirah*, is the most widely read of Islamic literature and plays a key role in shaping Muslim understandings of the human ideal. Muslim writing about Muhammed rarely spares any superlative in speaking of the perfection of his qualities, and his life, emerging amid the ignorance and debasement of 7th century Arabic culture, is taken as a miraculous proof of his status as God's prophet.[5]

Among most orthodox Muslims Muhammed is the ideal in terms of behavior, receptivity to God's will, and knowledge. This does not necessarily imply, however, that he has a particular metaphysical status which distinguishes him from the rest of humanity. However, there are widely accepted traditions which go a step further and state the Muhammed was without sin, because God removed it all from his heart, a tradition which for many Muslims allows the claim that Muhammed is equal to Jesus as understood within Islam. Finally, among Sufis in particular, Muhammed is the "Prophetic Substance" incarnate, and thus the origin of all Islamic spirituality.[6] He isn't merely an example of total obedience in external behavior, he is the door to God, the "concrete and semi-sacramental presence that prefigures the state of salvation or of deliverance and that invites one not to legality or to the social virtues but to self-transcendence and transformation-hence to extinction and to a second birth."[7] This exalted understanding of Muhammed underscores the fact that in Islam prophethood, which is the abiding link between God and humanity, is central to any understanding of either humankind or salvation.

19th and early 20th century Christian apologists to Islam recognized that the Muslim understanding of Muhammed was crucial to the Muslim reception of teaching about Jesus. In some cases Christians tried to sully the character of Muhammed, hoping to turn Muslims to the supposedly better example of Jesus. In other cases Christians recognized Muhammed's outstanding character, but insisted that his moral flaws disqualified him to be an example. A third approach was to leave aside details of Muhammed's life and simply to stress that his life, unlike that of Jesus, was not perfect, and thus he could not bear the burden of human sin. More recently Kenneth Craig and others have explored the idea that Christians should see Muhammed as a true prophet, and through the exploration of the meaning of prophethood find common ground for discussion between Christians and Muslims. It is certain that so long as the fundamental declaration of Islamic faith is articulated "there is no God but Allah, and Muhammed is his prophet", the person and character of Muhammed will be central not only to discussions of prophecy, but human nature as well.

D. Body, Soul, and Spirit

In the Quran Adam was created when God breathed his spirit (*ruh*) into the dirt which he had fashioned into a human form. (15:29, 37:72, 32:9) Jesus was similarly conceived in Mary.(21:91, 66:12) This created a *nafs*, the word used in the Quran for the human self or soul. This self is portrayed as transcending its bodily existence, and survives after the death of the body awaiting God's final judgement and its future in paradise of hell.

For most Muslims this understanding of their own humanity is sufficient, and it is the basis of all orthodox Muslim belief. In the history of Islam, however, both philosophical speculation and efforts to fully understand statements in the Quran about human life led to the development of more complex understandings of human nature. For mystics and others the Quranic suggestion of a link between the human soul and the Divine spirit was elaborated for the purpose of both better understanding human nature and the mystic pilgrimage into oneness with God. Thus the *nafs* and *ruh* of the human, representing the horizontal and vertical planes of human existence, can be regarded as competitors for the *qalb* or heart, wherein the possibility of good and evil lies. Greek philosophy also provided a resource for speculation. Aristotle's distinction between the nutritive, sensitive, and the rational aspects of the soul was used, for example, to help clarify the differences between plants, animals, and humans and *jinn*. Neo-Platonic ideas of the emanation of the soul were used to clarify the understanding of *nafs* and *ruh* in terms of the emanation of the soul from Prime Mover or One Absolute Cause. The concept of the animal soul (passively obedient to natural impulses) could complement Quranic references to the "soul which commands", the "soul which blames", and the "soul at peace" to develop a theory of personality and personal decision making.[8] Al-Sharastani and al-Ghazzali succeeded in integrating Greek ideas with Quranic interpretation in such a way as to have a lasting impact on Islamic thought. However, the dominant Muslim position has been to identify *ruh* with *nafs*, seeing humans as sensible bodies interpenetrated by the soul, which is eternal and separable from the body after death.[9] More elaborate theories of the origin and place of the human soul or spirit have been confined primarily to Islamic mysticism and philosophy.

E. Predestination and Free Will

Like other religions, Islamic philosophy and theology have developed in response to both intrinsic internal questions, and questions posed by the external environment. Due to the apparent contradiction between the Quranic emphasis on Allah's omniscience and omnipotence and complete human responsibility in the face of God's judgement, the issue of human free will became one of the earliest sources of theological debate in Islam. This debate extended naturally into the eternal qualities of Allah, the eternal and changeless Allah's relationship to an apparently changing creation, the meaning of justice, and human psychology.

The relationship between *qada'* (Allah's will, knowledge, or decision) and *qadar* (its implementation) was central to the debate. The two extremes in the debate; the insistence on complete freedom of the human will (associated with the *Mutalizites* or sometimes *Qadarians*), and the *Djabriya* insistence than humans had no part at all in their actions, were eventually excluded as heretical. The mediating view of al-Ash'ari, which came to be regarded as orthodox, maintained that humans bore responsibility for their actions despite the fact that they represent Allah's *qada'* and *qadar*. This was by virtue of their having accepted or become conscious of these actions as their own (*iktisab*). For al-Ash'ari even this consciousness was created by God, but within orthodox Islam there was room for continued debate over how acceptance of God's fore-ordained will as one's own came about.

Some modern Islamic scholars downplay belief in predestination. Abdul Ala Mawdudi, who was one of the most influential Muslim teachers of this century, doesn't mention it as part of Islamic doctrine in his popular book *Towards Understanding Islam*, and other modernist thinkers have revived *Mutalizite* arguments on for free will. But virtually all classical books on Islamic belief, and most modern presentations of Islamic doctrine, list belief in predestination according to the Ash'arite understanding as a *fundamental Islamic belief*, as important as belief in God, the angels, the books of prophecy, the prophets, and the final judgement and life after death.

In some modern Islamic movements *iktisab* is regarded as almost a conversion experience, in which a person who thought he or she was acting freely finally submits to the reality of Allah's Lordship, and with this submits to God's revealed law as his or her way of life. It is common in Malaysia, for example, that a convert from nominal to committed Islam to say "I understood *the qada' qadar* of Allah". The questions which this raises about the psychological meaning of conversion within a deterministic system are no less vexing than those which led to the great Armenian - Calvinist debates in Christianity. Yet for those involved there seems to be a psychological satisfaction which defies armenian reasoning.

F. Human Social Realities

While the Quran vividly awakens its hearers to the reality of God's judgement on their lives, it does not foretell an *imminent* end to the world. It has a wealth of material related to regulating family and social relations. Particularly in the *surahs* revealed later in Muhammed's life it emphasizes the maintenance of Muslim families and the development of the Islamic community. The *sunnah* (traditions concerning Muhammed's words and acts) greatly extended this teaching, and the subsequent development of Islamic law gave the Muslim community extensive guidance for the forming of human communities which lived within God's will. The details of that guidance are beyond the scope of this essay. More relevant to understanding modern Islam is the challenge which modernity and the globalization of certain social norms has posed to Muslims. Some Muslims have opted for seeking to maintain or recreate traditional Muslim lifestyles, and others have simply adopted to modern lifestyles while reducing Islam to a private religious orientation. The majority, however, have tried to both defend and re-evaluate Islamic teaching on authentic patterns of human life in a way which shows its value and relevance in a contemporary setting. In particular they have addressed contemporary issues of pluralism, gender roles, the family, the breakdown of morality, economic justice, and nationalism.[10]

1. Pluralism

A central claim of modern Muslims is that Islam's traditional approach to society acknowledged and valued religious, ethnic, and cultural pluralism, while maintaining the essential equality of all humans. (49:13, 5:48) The principle that there is no compulsion in religion (2:256) and the traditional tolerance of Muslim societies for religious minorities is often cited as evidence that Islamic principals should be the basis of a modern pluralistic society. However, these traditional values worked most effectively when different communities could maintain their integrity by isolating a relatively large part of their lives from the larger society. The intrusiveness of the modern state on every aspect of human life, and the globalization of economic and cultural forces seems to make this impossible. While some Muslims seek to use the fundamental value of pluralism to develop new social systems for a modern world, others argue that modernity itself is the problem. Rather than accepting it as inevitable, they believe Muslim should oppose it by re-instituting God's plan for social life as revealed in the Quran and Hadith. They invite non-Muslims to accept their efforts on the basis of what they present as Islam's essentially pluralist outlook.

2. Gender

In the face of criticism that Islamic teaching about gender roles is oppressive to women, modern Muslims have offered two answers. Some have simply affirmed that the traditional Islamic way is, when properly implemented, both fairer and better for women than modern standards for treatment of women. Others have sought to undermine traditionalist Islamic teaching and discover in the Quran and Hadith a basis for equality and justice which is superior to a modern understanding of gender and gender relations.

What sets both groups apart from non-Islamic discussions is the affirmation that relationships between men and women are determined by covenants of rights and responsibilities, and that the marriage covenant is the central realm of sexual relations. Islam, particularly seen in its historical context, is asserted to be revolutionary in the rights and protection offered to women through these covenants. Thus, for example, modern apologists for Islam (including many women) interpret Islamic requirements that women dress modestly not as evidence of male subjugation, but as a means by which women take a responsible attitude towards men's natural sexual urges. Similarly the respectful distance men are enjoined to keep from women outside their family gives women the freedom to be regarded as human beings rather than sex objects. It is precisely these values of mutual respect and responsibility, and these as the basis for developing human relations, which Muslims would like to see replace the emphasis on power as the key determinate of human relations in modern social analysis.[11]

3. The Family

Probably no issue troubles Muslims more than the breakdown of the family in modern world. In light of this they are astounded at the frequent western accusation that somehow Islam itself is inimical to stable family relations. As in gender relations, they assert that the Islamic provisions are based on rights and responsibilities which realistically meet universal human needs. Marriage itself is a contract in which both parties have specific obligations and rights, and thus there are provisions for maintaining the relationship when these cannot be met, or for breaking it off without either partner being left defenseless and destitute. The provision for polygamy, dowry, and divorce fit into this framework. Modernist Muslims also maintain that Islamic law is flexible enough to deal with changing circumstances. Thus polygamy was allowed as a means of bringing all women into the protective relationship of the family in earlier times, but is sufficiently restricted to prevent modern women from being abused by it. And indeed Muslim states such as Malaysia have greatly restricted polygamy on basically Islamic grounds.

The major emphasis of modern Muslim interpretations of marriage is that it should provide a secure environment for every member of the family. Muslims believe that Islamic teaching accomplishes this better than secular laws precisely because it acknowledges fundamental gender and generation differences, and insists on mutual responsibility among family members. The Islamic system is said to secure each individual in concentric networks of responsibility, beginning with the nuclear family and extending outward through the extended family, local community, and to the entire *ummah* or Islamic society. This, Muslims would say, is superior to the Western system of autonomous individuals reliant on either themselves or the state. While the Islamic viewpoint is certainly open to debate at many levels, it cannot be denied that it has shown a strong appeal for many post-Christian Europeans and Americans, and has given Islamic minorities an enviable solidarity.[12]

4. Morality and Political structures

For Muslims morality is fundamentally submission to God's laws. The strength necessary to act morally comes from the knowledge of that law, and of the consequences for obedience and disobedience. The willful ignorance of modern people towards the existence of God and God's way for humans destroys the possibility for moral action. True religion generally (for Islam acknowledges that many religions reliably taught God's existence and ways) and Islam specifically are the only answer to this dilemma. Revelation is the only source of religion, and thus the Revelation of Muhammed, the last and most complete, is the way back to individual and social morality.

On these points there is universal assent among Muslims, in the face of any claims that morality emerges out of either enlightened self-interest, consensual agreements on social behavior, or innate human altruism. Muslims recognize the problem of competing claims stemming from different revelations, but argue that in such a case the last and fullest revelation must take precedence. At the same time Islam does recognize the role of both individual judgement (*ra'y*) and consensus (*ijma*) in resolving moral problems not directly addressed by God's revelation. The great political issue for modern Islam is determining the line between God's clear revelation and the realm of human decision making, and to suggest public institutions in which a consensus can be reached.

5. Economic Justice

One of the great demands Allah makes in the Quran is for *adl*, justice, particularly in economic relations. Historically a great attraction of Islam was the uniformity and fairness of its laws regulating trade. These, with a certain flexibility added by legal devices called *hiyal*, allowed Muslims to create the widest system of trade relations in the world prior to the age of European colonialism, and to enjoy unprecedented economic prosperity. Imperialism and colonialism, driven by European economic, social, and religious theories which in one way or another justified exploitation of conquered peoples, left much of the Muslim world deeply impoverished, even as they introduced rapid technological change and eventually democratic social theory. To many Muslims twentieth century economic structures have only deepened the poverty of the mass of Muslims, even if a tiny Muslim elite has grown rich on the exploitation of oil and other natural resources. While some Muslims have been attracted to socialism and Marxism as alternatives, the essentially secular and atheist foundations of both are unattractive to most Muslims. Not surprisingly there has been a major movement to re-discover and articulate the principles of Islamic economics in order to offer an alternative to the systems under which Muslims have suffered so terribly. Islamic economics is now a flourishing field of academic inquiry, and in many Muslim nations the government is publicly committed to putting Islamic economic institutions and structures in place. Describing either the principles of Islamic economics or its institutions goes beyond the scope of this essay. However, should Muslim nations gain the power to resist the force of global free-for-all capitalism, or close their doors to it in frustration, Islamic economic systems will become more significant in the future.

6. Ummah and Nation

The Islamic ideal normally distinguishes only between the Islamic and non-Islamic world, the *dar a-Islam* and *dar al-harb.* The former is the unified world of Islam; the latter is the realm of struggle to implement Islam. Classically these distinguished geographical realms under Muslim political and military control from those which were not. Such nations as existed in the *dar al-Islam* were regarded as units of political and administrative expediency and in theory the whole of the *dar al-Islam* was ruled by the Caliph. As late as the 1920's Muslims around the world looked hopefully at the prospect of Islam and its believers united under some type of political structure. The pan-Islamic movement did not achieve this goal, and the debate over how the world-wide unity of Muslim believers, the *ummah*, should be achieved in an era of nation-states goes on. In part this debate centers on how to create an Islamic state. While some purists among Muslims argue that no modern state can realize Islamic ideals apart from the unity of the *ummah*, there are nonetheless active political movements throughout the Muslim world to transform existing nations into Islamic states under the rule of *sharia* law. At the same time dominantly Muslim states have formed organizations and alliances which attempt at some level to foster the overall unity of the *ummah*, and intellectuals continue to theorize about how actual political unity can be attained.

7. The Realization of Islam

We cannot understand modern Muslims if we do not understand that the drive to realize the ideals sketched above is central to their understanding of human fulfillment. Paradise (see below) is the reward for a life of submission to God's will. But for Muslims the authentic fulfillment of that submission should come here on earth, not a distant afterlife. Muslims have never been taught to push their hopes for human authenticity to a future eschaton. And this human authenticity, although it has a distinctive inner dimension, is for Muslims inextricably linked with the implementation of particular personal roles, and family, community, political, and economic structures. Unless Islam changes dramatically Muslims will never be content with less than *din*, an all-embracing pattern of life, ordered according to God's or law.

V. The End of Creation

Islam is a way of life. But this way of life was always a way *to* eternal victory, reward, and success in the form of promised ***al-Jannah***, paradise, or literally "Garden". This way leads through death and the grave, and God's judgement, before reaching its end with either eternal bliss or eternal suffering.

A. Death and the Grave

The continued existence of the soul after death is central to Islamic teaching. The Arabs believed that life continued, after a fashion, in the grave. The Quran makes only indirect reference to punishment in the grave (47:27, 6:93). However, the traditions of the prophet affirm the importance of the grave ("the grave is the first stage of the journey to eternity") and address directly the fears of life in the grave. By the time Islamic theologians developed the first creeds Islam had a highly developed doctrine of punishment in the grave (*adhab al-kabr*). The tradition states that two angels, *Munkar* and *Nakir*, will examine each person after death regarding Muhammed (or in a more elaborate form, God, Muhammed, religion, and direction of prayer). The faithful will give a satisfactory answer, and will be left to await the Resurrection. Some traditions suggest that the graves of the faithful will be mystically in communion with the *Kaba'* or the grave of Muhammed, and that in this way they will find comfort and even bliss as they await the resurrection. Those without a satisfactory answer will be beaten continually in the grave until the resurrection, (except on Fridays). Some traditions excuse the righteous unbelievers from this punishment. Regardless of the specific elaboration of tradition, the primary emphasis is on correct belief as the hope for avoiding immediate punishment in the grave. It is a tradition in Islam that as a person dies they whisper the *Shahada*, or basic belief in Allah and Muhammed.

In addition to the hope of avoiding punishment, and finding some comfort in the grave, Islam holds out the possibility of avoiding both the grave and God's final judgement. The prophets are taken directly to paradise upon their death. For ordinary Muslims this privilege is obtained when death comes through martyrdom, primarily when fighting on behalf of Islam. Women who die in childbirth, and those who die in the holy land on a pilgrimage, are also martyrs who obtain the entry into paradise directly after death. This hope has motivated many Muslims to embrace death for Islamic causes, with the modern suicide bombers of Hamas providing a notable recent example. A more benign effect has been to encourage elderly Muslims to put off making their pilgrimage until they are quite feeble in the hope of dying in the holy land, where many who have the means remain illegally after the pilgrimage is over.

B. The Final Judgement

The earliest revelations in the Quran emphasize the unity and majesty of God, and the certainty of God's judgement on those who have not acknowledged God as their creator and submitted to God's will. Muhammed's earliest preaching focused on the day of judgement which would mark the end of the world, and salvation from hell was a dominant theme. Belief in a day of reckoning (*qiyamah*) and a resurrection of the dead to judgement (*hashr*) is found in earliest Islamic creeds, and is universally regarded as an essential doctrine. The earliest revelations to Muhammed stress the certainty of God's judgement and of punishment in hell-fire for wrong-doers and paradise for the righteous. (88, 99, 101, and many others) Later revelations and traditions greatly expanded the Islamic picture of the last judgement. The most basic elements are:

the last day when the present creation will be annihilated,

the resurrection of the dead,

their presentation before God and the reading out of the complete record of all their good and evil deeds,

the rewarding and punishing of each person strictly according to the balance off their good and evil deeds,

the intercession of Muhammed on behalf of the faithful.

the sending of the successful to Paradise, and the losers to the fire and torment of Hell.

Muslims learn of these through accounts of the final judgement which are portrayed with vivid imagery. Most accept these accounts as literal portrayals of what they will personally face. Avoiding the terrors of hell, and indeed the uncertainty of the judgement day, both motivates Muslims to obedience in God's law, and to seeking to mitigate the effects of their sins.

C. Salvation

Within the Islamic tradition the specific Arabic word for salvation, *hajat*, is not often used. Instead humans at the final judgement are characterized as "winners" and "losers", as those who have succeeded and those who have failed. Salvation is moving from being a loser to being a winner, and thus obtaining paradise in the end. And this salvation is accomplished by taking the concrete steps, provided by God, which insure that at the final judgement a human life will have more good deeds than bad when weighed in the balance. Islam stresses that these steps are God's provision for human failure, so that while the immediate cause of salvation may be human actions, the possibility of that actions will lead to salvation comes from God's grace and mercy.

1. Sin and its Remedies

The Quran does not present a formal theory of sin (*krait's* is the general quranic term), but recognizes a difference between faults (*dhanb*) and intentional sins (*ithm*) The Quran suggests that those who avoid intentional sins will find forgiveness in Allah (53:111), and also offers forgiveness to those who repent of such sins or infidelity. Later Muslim theologians discussed extensively both the distinction between light (*sagha'dir*) and heavy (*kaba'ir*) sins, which acts belonged to each category, and how they could be remedied so as to avoid eternal punishment. One of the first divisions in Islam was the withdrawal of the *Kharidjites,* who insisted that not only *shirk* (making something or someone equal to God), but heavy sins rendered a person an infidel (*kafir*) and required repentance. The *Mutalizites* also insisted that punishment for heavy sins on the last day could be avoided only through repentance. The controversy centered around the importance of personal deeds versus the importance of belief in both maintaining membership in the community, and in achieving paradise at the final judgement.

The orthodox view, developed by the *Murdji'ies*, gave priority to belief for both membership in the community and attaining paradise. They stressed that each person is responsible for his or her own sins, and that no person can pay the price for the sins of another. (4:111, 6:164) Yet they were equally forceful in asserting that God is merciful and forgiving, and that no one should despair because of their sin. (12:87, 15:56, 39:53) A system of classification of sins then provided guidelines to specific remedies for sinful acts.[13]

In the orthodox view thoughts are not sins, or are the lightest of sins, unless they are put into action. They are not taken into account on the judgement day. One tradition of the prophet states: "Allah does not take into account what the members of my community think, as long as they do not pronounce it or carry it out."[14]

Dhanb, mistakes or faults, are overcome by removing the fault which caused them through knowledge and good works. One tradition (often quoted on the television in Malaysia at the time of evening prayers) stresses that "each footstep on the way to evening worship at the mosque overcomes 10,000 sins." For the believer there was no need to seek special forgiveness for such mistakes.

Heavy sins, normally those which involved consciously breaking God's commands, could be remedied through formally asking for forgiveness (*istighfar*), and through restitution if a person had been wronged. Such sins, although avoidable, were regarded as ubiquitous in humans and necessary so that humans would rely on God for mercy and forgiveness. One tradition states that Allah would eliminate his community if it didn't sin, and create another people who would commit sins, ask forgiveness, and be forgiven.[15] Another states that the prophet prayed for forgiveness several times a day, indicating that no one should think themselves above the possibility of committing heavy sins.

The ultimate sin, s*hirk,* required repentance (*tawbah*), and the embracing of Islam through the confession of the one God, Allah, and the prophet-hood of Muhammed.

2. Intercession (shafa'a).

The concept of intercession (s*hafa'a*) is found in the Quran, but primarily in the denial that anyone can intercede for another on the day of judgement (2:48, 2:254). However, an elaborate tradition developed supporting the idea that Muhammed would intercede on behalf of the faithful who had committed heavy sins and been cast into hell, and would then lead them into paradise. In some traditions this power to intercede was extended to others, with some maintaining that the followers of all the genuine prophets would have their prophet to intercede for them on the day of judgement. In many parts of the Muslim world intercessory prayers are offered on behalf of the dead, although this has been a matter of great controversy between traditionalist Muslims and those seeking to restore a purer Islam based on only the original teaching of the Quran and Hadith.[16]

3. Cleanliness

Islam recognizes that religion is not merely a matter of good and bad deeds, but of a relationship with or toward God which has a psychological dimension as well. Muslims may feel distanced or alienated from God not only by sins which can lead to hell, but by unintentional acts or circumstances (such as being touched by an unclean animal, or having impure thoughts about a person of the opposite sex). These make a person unfit to worship, and thus cut off from the primary means by which they live in obedience to God. As in Judaism these actions are circumstances are associated with cleanliness, and indeed in many Islamic languages holiness and cleanliness are interchangeable terms. The Quran and Hadith make many provisions for situations of uncleanliness, primarily through special forms of ritual washing in addition to those prescribed before prayer.

D. Conclusion

In the end Islam seeks to offer a way of life in which, by God's mercy, success at the final judgement is obtainable by all humans, and for the faithful is certain. The life which leads to success follows a way clearly revealed by God, trodden and further explained by God's prophet, and minutely analyzed by generations of Muslim scholars. For every possible misdeed along that way there is (by God's mercy) a corresponding act which will mitigate its ultimate effects. For every misstep there is a way back on track. There are Muslims who are racked with doubt and guilt, and who feel that nothing they do can overcome the burden of their sins. When no Islamic solution meets their psychological and spiritual needs many have found peace in the message of the gospel. However, the history of missions among Muslims has shown that the majority find within their own religion provisions for living toward God's end for the world which give them both confidence in their present life, and hope for the future. Finding ways to present the truth of the gospel, without denigrating the claims of Islamic teaching or offending against Muhammed, remains one of the great challenges of Christian mission.

VI. Bibliography

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Notes

1 Islamic Spirituality I, p. 359.

2 During the period when the author lived in Malaysia (1985-1992) it was not uncommon to hear stories about *jinn* being involved in human affairs. Politicians were sometimes accused of enlisting *jinn* to attack their opponents, cases of mass hysteria were attributed to *jinn*, and more girls who became pregnant, and their families, would attribute the child to a *jinn*, to whom the girl was said to be legitimately married.

3 An oft told anecdote tells how one famous teacher would not eat watermelon, because although the melon itself was an allowed food, he could not determine whether Muhammed had spit or swallowed the seeds, and thus had no guidance in the matter.

4 Islamic Spirituality, p.359

5 See, for example, Mawdudi's account of Muhammed's life in his *Towards Understanding Islam.*

6 Islamic Spirituality, Vol 1, p. 48-49.

7 Ibid, p.49.

8 Islamic Spirituality, Vol 1. 295.

9 Shorter Encylopedia of Islam, H.A.R Gibbs and J.H. Kraemer, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1961, p.435. Students of Islam should exercise care in taking any presentation of Islamic beliefs in this area as authoritative. The systems of al-Shastarani, al-Ghazzali, and al-Baidawi in particular are sometimes presented as representing the orthodox Muslim viewpoint, when in fact their systems, although not rejected as heretical, are not necessarily representative of all orthodox opinion.

10 Ziauddin Sardar's books, *Islamic Futures* and *The Future of Islamic Civilization*, (Pelanduk Press, Kuala Lumpur, 1988) present an overview of one strand of popular modern Muslim thinking on these issues. Of particular interest is a model Islamic constitution (*Islamic Futures*, pp. 327-345) which seeks to codify Islamic teaching in a form useful to the creation of a modern state.

11 "Religious Ideology, Women and the Family: the Islamic Paradigm, Barbara Freyer Stowasser, in *The Islamic Impulse*, ed. Barbara Freyer Stowasser, Washington D.C. 1987, pp. 262-296

12 Mahmoud Abu-Saud, *Concept of Islam*, American Trust Publications, 1990. pp. 121-127. Abu-Saud's presentation wouldn't necessarily find agreement with all Muslims, but represents one typical apologetic approach for Muslim views of the family.

13 See *Muslim Devotions*, Constance Padwick, OneWorld, Oxford, 1997, pp. 173-208 for a full account of Muslim prayer related to seeking forgiveness for sins.

14 Shorter Encylopedia of Islam, H.A.R Gibbs and J.H. Kraemer, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1961, p.251

15 Salvation through Repentance, Abu Ameenah Bilil Philips, Tawheed Publications, 1990, p.4

16 As is the case in Christian tradition, the chronological experience of the soul after death is not always clear, or agreed, in the Islamic tradition.