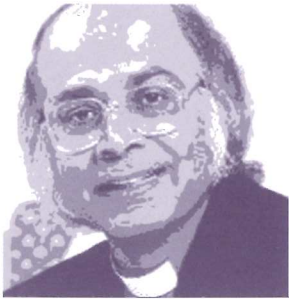


LOVE AND LAW IN CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM

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CHRISTIANITY

Love and law are intimately related in the Hebrew Bible. The well-known injunction “to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and might” is found in Deuteronomy, or the “book of the second law” found in the temple during the reign of Josiah in the seventh century BC (Deuteronomy 6.5). Its usual companion, “and your neighbour as yourself” is found in the book of Leviticus, again in the context of legislation (Leviticus 19.18). It has been said about Leviticus that its underlying aim is to ensure that God’s holiness will be able to regulate and direct every area of human activity.¹

In his teaching, Jesus was not abolishing the law but interiorising it. It is not the letter of the law that is most important but its spirit and the change that it brings into our lives and attitudes. Thus it is not only murder that is forbidden but any desire to destroy or even to ridicule another human being. Similarly, it is not only committing adultery that is wrong but every evil desire which looks on other human beings as objects which exist only for the fulfilment of my appetites (Matthew 5.2–30). Jesus, moreover, combined the two precepts about loving God and loving one’s neighbour in a highly original way. According to him, these two commandments are the ones from which all others derive. They are, therefore, the basis of the Mosaic law and also the inspiration of the prophetic books (Mark 12.29–31; Matthew 22.37–40; Luke 10.25–28). Leviticus had foreseen the question of the lawyer, “and who is my neighbour?” The injunction to “love your neighbour as yourself” is followed rapidly by the command to “love the stranger as yourself” (Leviticus 19.34). In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus removes any possibility of misunderstanding and teaches that even those furthest from us in terms of creed, culture or class are to be regarded as our neighbours (Luke 10.29–37).²

St Paul too, continuing the moral teaching of Jesus, tells us quite clearly that “love is the fulfilling of the law” (Romans 13.10b). The Augustinian maxim “love and do what you will” is also to be understood in this sense. For Augustine, of course, the possibility of loving is itself a divine gift: “Give what you command and command what you will” (*Confessions* X.29,40).

In the Christian tradition, therefore, there is the basic understanding that even the possibility of our loving God and our neighbour depends on God’s prior love. It is because God loves us and we respond to his love that we are able to love. A central feature of the gospel is God’s love of sinners (brought out beautifully in the parable of the Prodigal Son – Luke 15.11–32). We are not able to love in

the strength of our own nature for that is vitiated by selfishness and rebellion. It is as we open ourselves to God’s love that it not only transforms our own lives but also flows out to others. A parallel to God’s love of sinners is the teaching to love even our enemies, to pray for them and to meet their basic needs (Matthew 5.44; Romans 12.17–21).

ISLAM

Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi, in the preface to the second book of the *Mathnawi-i-Maanwi*, claims that in Islam similarly God’s love is primary whereas our love is derivative. It is only the grace of God which makes it possible for us to love God. He refers to Qur’an 5.57 where it is said that God loves the believers and they, in turn, love him. Louis Massignon was convinced that Islamic mysticism was deeply rooted in the Qur’an itself, and certainly the ubiquity and popularity of Sufism in the Muslim world cannot be accounted for except in this way.

Both Allama Iqbal and Margaret Smith have drawn our attention to the contact and dialogue between the early Sufis and the Christian monks of the deserts of Syria and Egypt. Iqbal goes so far as to say that the presence of this kind of monasticism as “a working ideal of life” was one of the causes of the rise of Sufism towards the end of the eighth century AD.³ Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh tells us that God’s infinite love and condescension and the response of love which they elicit was ever a concern of the desert fathers.⁴ We certainly see something similar amongst the early Sufis.

The Sufis regarded love as the great tendency towards unification in the world. The striving for the ideal is a movement of love, according to Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and it is this which drives forward the evolution of forms. Everything is moving towards the Divine Beloved and will be fulfilled when all is united to the Beloved. Love for God makes us more and more conformed to God’s will but we do not lose our personalities thereby. Rather, they are more sharply defined and enriched by this encounter. Iqbal believed that the experience of absorption into the Divine is only the beginning of mystical experience and that the mystic must go on in the spiritual path before the ultimate experience is reached. This experience is the realisation that the Divine is the ground of our being and the one in whom we live and move. It is in this experience that we realise both our unity with the Divine and our own immortality.

Iqbal does not favour the common tendency to see in God only the beautiful Divine Beloved. Islam teaches that God is angry with sin and its consequences. Love for God must also include love of this wrathful aspect, which destroys all

NOTES

- 1 R K Harrison, *Leviticus: An Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester: IVP, 1980) p. 32.
- 2 On the question of the sense in which Jesus was original at this point see further C E B Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St Mark* (Cambridge: CUP, 1966) pp. 376ff., and D E Nineham, *St Mark* (Harmondsworth: Penguin) pp. 323ff.
- 3 *The Development of Metaphysics in Persia* (Lahore: Bazm-i-Iqbal, 1964) pp. 76ff. See also Margaret Smith, *Studies in Early Mysticism in the Near and Middle East* (London: 1931)
- 4 Benedicta Ward (ed.) *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (London: Mowbrays, 1981) pp. vii f.
- 5 *Zabur-i-Ajam* (Lahore: 1970) p. 264; see also Pas che Bayad Kard Ay Aqwam-i-Sharq (Lahore: 1936) p. 15.
- 6 *Fihri ma Fihri*, (Tehran: 1959) pp. 240–1 and *Mathnawi* VI 2073, 2075.
- 7 *Payam-i-Mashriq* (Lahore: 1969) p. 207.
- 8 *Jawaid-Nama* (Lahore: 1974) p. 39.
- 9 *Zabur-i-Ajam* (Lahore: 1970) p. 160.

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that is not according to the divine purpose.⁵ Among the Sufis, love and fear are very closely related. Al-Ghazzali's conversion came about as a result of realising afresh the holiness of God, and the great fear this brought upon him. The Bible teaches a similar theme: "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Proverbs 10.9).

Iqbal is characteristic of Sufi attitudes when he holds that love is the true test of faith, and the criterion for distinguishing true believers from false. Those who adhere to the formal aspects of Islam are not necessarily Muslims. On the other hand, there may be some who, even though they are outside the formal community, are true believers. This kind of attitude led Sufis to a positive view of other faiths. The important thing was love of God, everything else was transient. Rumi teaches that love for the Creator is latent in all, be they Zoroastrians, Jews or Christians.⁶ How can anyone not love the author of their own being? When the impediments are removed, the love becomes manifest. For Iqbal, too, God is not exclusively worshipped within any particular cultus, but reveals himself to all who desire him ardently.⁷ He emphasised the importance of a worshipper's sincerity, rather than the formal religious system in which the worship is offered.⁸

In most Sufi literature, it is fair to say, that love means either the love of God or the love for God. The love for "neighbour" is not absent, however. There is a verse, for example, where Iqbal claims that love is the summary of the Shariah, the Muslim law, saying "I have not researched into the custom and way of the law, except to find that the denier of love is an infidel and a heretic."⁹ Love is important for the whole of life, and it cannot be compartmentalised; it needs to be primary in society, also. Such love includes both love of God and love of one's neighbour. It is love of God which leads to religion having an important place in society. Religion is not, however, merely dry-as-dust ritual, law or theology. It is rather devotion to the living God. Religion itself, moreover, recognises that our love of God is shown by our love for our fellow human beings. This is why, according to Iqbal, the Shariah includes both our duty to God and our duty to our neighbour.

CONCLUSION

Christianity and Islam are different faiths, but they grow from a shared Abrahamic inheritance, and have interacted throughout their history. We should not pretend that they are the same, but nor should we be surprised to find common themes. Particularly in the present political situation, it is good to remember how much we share with our Muslim neighbours. ■