

AN ISLAMIC UNDERSTANDING OF SIN AND BROKENNESS IN SOCIETY

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'[T]he human being has been born innocent' (*Tariq Ramadan*¹)

'The Islamic doctrine of salvation does not conceive of men and women as sinners who must be saved through spiritual regeneration. Rather it holds that since man is not dead in sin, he does not need spiritual rebirth ... The basic emphasis of Islamic salvation lies instead in the historical responsibility of its followers, namely the establishment of the ideal religio-political order with a worldwide membership of all those who believe in God and His revelation through Muhammad, upon whom be peace' (*Abdulaziz A. Sachdina*²).

These words of two Islamic scholars provide important clues for understanding how Muslims describe the human condition. In what follows the beliefs of most thoughtful, mainstream Muslims are elaborated under five headings, and in each case there follows (in italics) a summary of how Christians might summarise their beliefs in response to the Muslim statement.³

THERE WAS NO SUCH THING AS 'THE FALL'

According to the Qur'anic accounts concerning the Garden of Eden (e.g. in 20.115–124; 7.11–24; and 2.30–39), Satan (*Iblis*) was responsible for tempting Adam and Eve, and he therefore became the source and origin of evil among humankind. Adam and Eve sinned when they gave in to the temptation of Satan and ate from the forbidden tree. But their sin was a mistake rather than wilful disobedience. When Adam and Eve realised their mistake and prayed for forgiveness, they were forgiven and restored to the condition they had been in before. God gave them the message of Islam, and Adam became the first prophet of Islam. There was no such thing as 'The Fall', in which Adam's sin affected the whole human race.

According to the story of Adam and Eve in the book of Genesis, although they were tempted by the serpent (representing Satan), they were fully responsible for their action. The sin of Adam and Eve involved pride, disobedience to the will of God and a desire to be independent of God. As a result of their sin and as an indication of the seriousness of what they had done, Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden. The basic meaning of 'The Fall' is that their disobedience had serious consequences – both for themselves and for the whole human race. They were estranged from God and the relationship that they had previously enjoyed with God was spoiled. All human beings are therefore in the same state of estrangement from God.

THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS 'ORIGINAL SIN'; EVERY HUMAN BEING IS BORN INNOCENT

Sin is an act of disobedience to God's law, a breaking of moral and social conventions. Human beings are prone to evil – 'man's very soul incites him to evil unless my Lord shows mercy' (12.53; trans., MAS. Abdel Haleem⁴). However, they are not sinful by nature; they are simply imperfect and fallible. They are ignorant, not knowing the will of God, forgetful and weak – 'God wishes to lighten your burden; man was created weak' (4.28). There is no 'Original Sin'; sin is not hereditary, since every child that is born is in the same condition of innocence that Adam and Eve were in when they were created. In Sachdina's words, therefore, 'since man is not dead in sin, he does not need spiritual birth.'

Human beings are sinful by nature – 'Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me' (Ps 51.5). The basic meaning of the idea of 'Original Sin' is that human beings inherit the sinful human nature of their parents. While they are not guilty in the sense that they are responsible for their parents' sin, they inherit from them the tendency to sin. Our problem, therefore, is not simply that we commit individual sins and do things that are wrong, but that sinfulness is like a fatal disease which affects human nature. Expressions like 'being dead in sin' point to the seriousness of the Christian diagnosis of the human condition – a diagnosis which cries out for a very radical kind of remedy.

GOD FORGIVES THOSE WHO REPENT AND TURN FROM THEIR SINS

God is merciful and willing to forgive all who sincerely repent, believe and devote themselves to good works. God forgives simply by pronouncing forgiveness. Forgiveness depends on the justice and mercy of God and his declaration of forgiveness – 'Ask God for forgiveness: He is most forgiving and merciful' (4.106).

Repentance means confessing our sins, turning from the wrong that we have done and seeking God's mercy and forgiveness. There is no need, however, for any sacrifice or atonement. Since there is no collective responsibility, no person can bear the sins of another person (6.14; 7.28). Sin does not affect God personally, since he is so transcendent that he cannot be affected by the sins of his creatures. Each one of us individually is responsible before God, and no-one can bear the sins of any other person. Since Jesus did not die on the cross, there is no justification for ideas about 'redemption' through his death or for linking divine forgiveness with his death.

Many believe that good deeds that we do cancel the effects of bad deeds, and our good and bad deeds will be

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weighed in the balance by God on the Day of Judgement. We can hope that, if we live a good life, our good deeds will outweigh our bad deeds; but we cannot know until the Day itself (2.82). If God accepts us, we will be admitted to Paradise; if not, we go to Hell (7.40–46). Many believe that if they have even an atom of (Muslim) faith, they will enter Paradise. Most Muslims believe that they can trust the intercession of the Prophet to help them (24.62; 3.159). Some also believe in some kind of Purgatory through which they will pass before eventually entering Paradise.

Since God is both Creator and Judge, both loving and holy, his forgiveness cannot simply be a declaration that we are forgiven. If the laws of God have been broken, a simple pardon would undermine his law. Something more must be involved, since God can hardly remain just and holy while at the same time pardoning sinful people who turn their backs on him.

In forgiveness on the human level between people, the greater the sin, the more it costs for a person to forgive another person who has wronged him/her. Forgiving a serious sin involves bearing the consequences of that sin and refusing to punish the other person. When we forgive others for wrongs done to us, we are 'bearing their sin', suffering the consequences of their wrongs, and not taking revenge for what they have done to us. If we allow that there is anything in common between divine forgiveness and forgiveness between human beings, it must cost something for God to forgive. These are some of the basic ideas underlying the concepts of 'sacrifice' and 'atonement'.

Sin does affect God personally. It hurts him not only that his laws have been broken, but also that his relationship with people is broken. As Jesus died on the cross he was bearing the judgement on all human sin and at the same time demonstrating God's self-giving, sacrificial love for all people. God's forgiveness doesn't depend on our good deeds, but on his love and grace demonstrated in the death of Jesus on the cross. No amount of good deeds that we perform can outweigh our wrong deeds or change our sinful nature. The cross expresses the divine love that suffers.

Repentance needs to go deeper than the mere confession of sins; it needs to include the admission that there is something seriously wrong with our nature. The problem has to do with what we are, not just with our thoughts and actions. Part of the idea of 'salvation' is that if we trust in Jesus, we can be sure that we are forgiven and reconciled to God, and therefore have no need to fear condemnation and rejection on the Day of Judgement. Even in this life we can be sure of God's mercy and forgiveness.

GOD'S PROVISION FOR THE BROKENNESS OF INDIVIDUALS AND OF SOCIETY IS TO PROVIDE LAW, A MODEL OF THE IDEAL HUMAN BEING, AND THE BEST KIND OF ENVIRONMENT IN WHICH TO LIVE

God's response to the weakness of humankind is to provide three things: (1) guidance (*hidaya*), which is given by the Qur'an and shows people how to follow 'the straight path' (*al-sirat al-mustaqim*); (2) a model of how Muslims should live (as seen in all the many details about the life of the Prophet Muhammad recorded in *Hadith*); and (3) the Islamic community (which is what Sachedina describes as 'the ideal religio-political order with a worldwide membership'). One of the distinctive things about Islam is its emphasis on the need for the kingdom of God to be expressed not just in terms of spiritual transformation but also in political and social structures which create a truly just society.

The Qur'an and Hadith (the traditions about the life and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) provide the basis for *shari'a*, which is therefore seen as divine law through which God gives detailed guidance as to how individuals should live and how communities should function. When Muslims live together in the Muslim community and practise the faith together, the cohesion of the community encourages and supports those who might otherwise go astray, enabling them to live as true Muslims.

God's response to human sin is through (1) the incarnation (in which God reveals himself supremely through Jesus); (2) the atonement (in which he deals with the root of human sinfulness); (3) the Holy Spirit who lives in a special way in the lives of Jesus' followers and gives some knowledge about God to every human being; and (4) the Church to provide the community in which Christians support each other as they live in the world. God's provision for the human condition therefore means that our relationship with God can be restored. This can lead on to the restoration of relationships between people and ultimately to the healing of broken communities.

ISLAM PROVIDES THE IDEAL CONTEXT IN WHICH BELIEVERS CAN LIVE A LIFE THAT IS PLEASING TO GOD

Islam is a very down-to-earth and realistic religion. It isn't too other-worldly and doesn't set impossibly high moral standards (like 'turning the other cheek'). It can never become a privatised religion, concerned only with our relationship with God; it has to be expressed in terms of laws which promote the well-being of the whole society. This is why the ideal for most Muslims is that they should live in an Islamic society – if not in an Islamic state – where the majority are Muslims and where the law of the land is based on *shari'a*. Muslims

NOTES

1. Tariq Ramadan, *To Be A European Muslim* (Markfield: The Islamic Foundation, 1991), p. 63.
2. Abdulaziz A. Sachedina, 'The Creation of a Just Social Order in Islam', in Mumtaz Ahmad (ed.), *State, Politics and Islam* (Indianapolis IN: American Trust Publications, 1986), p. 116.
3. Some of this material is a reworking of chapter 28, 'Crucial Differences' in my *Cross and Crescent: Responding to the Challenges of Islam* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2007), pp. 288–98 and my *The Bible Through Muslim Eyes – And a Christian Response* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2008).
4. MAS. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an: A New Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

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► look back with pride to several 'Golden Ages' in the past – like the period of the four Caliphs who succeeded the Prophet Muhammad and the first great Islamic Empire which stretched from Morocco and Spain to the borders of China and India. A thoroughly Islamic ambience was created because, alongside the role of the mosque, education, law and commerce were moulded according to the spirit of Islam.

Most traditional Islamic societies have been profoundly affected by Western influence over the last three centuries, and 25 per cent of Muslims in the world are now living in societies where they are a minority and where Islamic law has no recognised role. While some Muslims accept this situation, others would like to extend the influence of Islam, believing that modern societies could be transformed if Muslims – together with non-Muslims living alongside them – were to follow the divine laws which God has revealed. They believe therefore that if Islamic standards were upheld, there would be no sexual immorality; and if everyone paid the *zakat* (the prescribed alms) and gave up usury, we wouldn't see all the excesses of modern capitalism.

While there have been many examples of Christianity becoming the religion of the state (e.g. the Holy Roman Empire and Christendom in Europe), Christians today are very aware of the dangers of any close alliance between religion and the state. There are too many examples in history of alliances between faith (both Christian and Muslim) and power in which faith has been corrupted by power. For the first 300 years Christians were a tiny minority within the Roman Empire, and often persecuted. The experience of 2,000 years of history therefore suggests that Christians should be able to live faithful Christian lives whether they are the majority or the minority in any society and under any kind of political system. While they will want Christian values to be upheld in their country as much as possible, they will be cautious about imposing their religion on others when they are in a position of political power, and in many situations they can expect persecution. Wherever they are, Christians are called to be 'salt' and 'light' in their society, believing that their lives can significantly influence for the better the communities in which they live. They are called to be faithful citizens, involved as much as they can be in contributing to the life of their nation.

When we look at many countries today which describe themselves a 'Islamic' and claim to be following Islamic law, we don't always see the kind of ideal society that Muslims believe can be created by Islam. There may be many reasons for the state of these societies, so it wouldn't be fair to blame 'Islam' for everything that we see. We can't help feeling, however, that the

Islamic diagnosis of the human condition is too optimistic because law, the prophetic model and living in an Islamic community are incapable of dealing adequately with the root of the brokenness of individuals and societies. The Christian diagnosis recognises a more deep-seated cause of the brokenness, which we describe in terms of 'fallenness' and 'original sin'. But the gospel of Jesus offers a very radical response to this desperate need. There is hope for our broken societies if individuals can experience the kind of transformation that Jesus offers and if Christian communities then seek to follow the example of Jesus as they live in the world and encourage others to live according to the values of the kingdom of God.

I hope that my Muslim friends will forgive me if I have misrepresented the teaching of orthodox Islam in any way, and trust that they will help me to express their beliefs more faithfully. I hope also that my Christian friends will understand that I have taken the risk of over-simplification in trying to express the beliefs of mainstream Christians in language that will make sense to Muslims. If there is to be genuine dialogue between Muslims and Christians on these subjects, we will need to range far and wide in our discussion of Scripture, tradition, theology, history and politics. Most of all, however, there will need to be genuine sharing from the heart, in which we are vulnerable enough to speak about our own brokenness and bear witness to the healing that we have found in Jesus, and our Muslim friends likewise share their understanding and experience of Islam as God's mercy and compassion extended to humankind. ■