

Islam and Christianity

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John Hick

I should like to say first how pleased I am to be here in Tehran and to have the opportunity to meet Muslim scholars and to try to contribute something to the on-going dialogue between our two faiths.

First let me indicate my own position within Christianity, which is as internally varied as is the Islamic world. I am an ordained minister of the United Reformed Church, which is a small part of the section of Christianity that split away from the Roman Catholic church in the 16th century CE, and within this I belong to the reforming end of the spectrum of positions. It is from this point of view that I am speaking. I am not however an official representative of that church, but am here entirely in my own personal capacity.

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Islam and Christianity are both based on revelation, both religions of the Book, meaning the holy Qur'an, revealed through the Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him), and the holy Bible, revealed through a number of different writers - both, together with other holy scriptures, being expressions of the heavenly Hidden Book or Preserved Book referred to several times in the Qur'an.

The traditional Muslim belief, as I understand it, is that the Qur'an was revealed to the Prophet over a period of some twenty years through the angel Gabriel; and that

the Torah and the New Testament are likewise from God but that the texts have become corrupted at the various points at which they differ from the Qur'an. In the case of the New Testament a prominent example of the distortion claim is the biblical account of Jesus' death on the cross.

From a modern Christian point of view the situation is more complex than this. First, it is often said by Christian theologians that our revelation is contained, not in a book, but in the person of Jesus (peace be upon him). However we only know about Jesus through the New Testament, particularly the four gospels. For many centuries, until within about the last hundred and fifty years, it was almost universally assumed by Christians that these are contemporary and historically reliable accounts of Jesus' life and teachings. But the modern historical study of the New Testament has led to the generally agreed conclusion that the earliest gospel, that of Mark, was written around 70 CE, about forty years after the time of Jesus; that Mathew and Luke were written in the 80's, using Mark as a their main source together with a possible, but disputed, second common source called Q, and other separate sources of their own; and that the gospel of John was written around the end of the century, some seventy or more years after Jesus' time. None of them was written by an eye witness to Jesus' life, but they relay stories and sayings handed down, and inevitably elaborated in the retelling, within the early Christian community, the different writers moulding their material in distinctively different ways according to their own interests and points of view. The result is that there is today endlessly inconclusive discussion and disagreement about whether this or that saying and action attributed to Jesus in the gospels is or is not historically authentic.

So from the point of view of modern Christian scholarship the New Testament does indeed contain doubtful sayings attributed to Jesus and doubtful

stories about him, not however because the original text was infallible and later became corrupted, but because of the nature of the gospels as having been written two or three generations after the event by different writers over a period of about thirty years, and in an age when the modern concept of biographical accuracy was unknown. This is a result of the historical study of the gospels, and I suppose the equivalent use in Islam of an historical method to discriminate between more and less reliable material is in the careful study of the hadiths. But the basic difference between Islam and Christianity in this area is that, whilst both the Bible and the Qur'an are sacred scriptures, within Christianity there is space for discussion and variety of opinion as to the correct text, whereas within Islam there is no uncertainty about the text itself, but space for discussion and variety of opinion in its interpretation.

However for many centuries, as I said, Christians generally assumed that, as the famous evangelical preacher Billy Graham once put it, 'The Bible is a book written by God through sixty secretaries'. And there is still a numerous and strong body of Christians who adhere to that view, mainly in Africa and in the southern part of the United States of America. But among Christian scholars there has come to be an increasing recognition of the human contribution to the formation of the scriptures. The four gospels, and also the letters of Paul and the other New Testament documents, reflect the cultural and political situations within which they were written, the religious ideas and practices of the Judaism of the time, the presupposed world view of first century CE Mediterranean culture, and the individual concerns of the writers and of their own local Christian communities. This is, I would suggest, to be expected. For any divine revelation to humanity, if it is to be intelligible to we human beings, must come through human minds and must be expressed in a human

language and in terms of the conceptual world embodied in that language, all of which are the products of a particular culture in a particular part of the earth at a particular point in human history. This does not mean that the process is not genuinely revelatory, but that revelation is necessarily mediated through human beings in all their specific historical particularity.

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Further, in the Bible there are two very different and incompatible conceptions of God and of God's will for humanity. The Torah tells us that when the Israelites came out of Egypt to occupy the land of Canaan, and were fighting the existing tribe of Amorites, 'the Lord threw down great stones from heaven upon them. . . there were more who died because of the hailstones than the men of Israel slew with the sword' (Joshua 10: 11), and then that God made the sun stand still for a whole day so they could have more time to slay the Amorites (10: 15); and later, when they were fighting the tribe of Amelek, God commanded the Israelites, 'Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass' (I Samuel 15: 3). This is a picture of a violent tribal warrior god. But there are other, later books of the Hebrew scriptures in which a quite different understanding of God is expressed, as the universal Lord who is gracious and merciful to all and not only to the Israelites. In the words of one of the psalms, 'as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward all who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us' (Psalm 103: 11-12).

In line with this latter Jewish conception of God, in the teaching of Jesus God is a God of love and mercy, and we should emulate these virtues on earth. He taught, 'You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbour and hate your

enemy”. But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven, for he makes his sun shine on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust’ (5: 43-5). Again, later in the new Testament we read, ‘God is love. . . He who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen’ (I John 4: 7, 20).

The result of this wide variety within the Bible is that in using it we all inevitably select, either consciously or unconsciously. Some Jews and some Christians appeal to the violent and vengeful conception, and others, the greatest number today, to the very different conception of God as Love.

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Now I would suggest that the general principle of human mediation must apply to the formation of the Qur’an. This is in a particular human language, Arabic; it has as its religious background the Prophet’s decisive break with the existing Arabian polytheism; it reflects the life-story of the Prophet himself, the history of the new Muslim community in Mecca, the Hijra, the community’s battles against those who were trying to destroy the new faith, their later return in triumph to Mecca, the social life of the new community, and all this against the background of the basic cultural ethos of Arabia at that time.

There is in one respect, however, a significant difference between the Qur’an and the Christian Gospels. In the Arabia into which the Prophet was born the whole commercial and political structure of Mecca was bound up with the existing polytheism. The ruling merchant aristocracy depended upon their control of the sacred place, the Kaaba, with the lucrative pilgrimages and trade that it attracted. In this situation the revelations to the Prophet inevitably had political and economic implications that profoundly threatened the existing system. Because the message

that he brought required radical social reform, it was strongly and sometimes violently resisted by the Meccan ruling class, to the point at which the then small Muslim community had to leave – hence the Hijra to Medina. Here they set up an Islamic state, for the governance of which the Qur'an contains a good deal of social teaching about such matters as the observance of treaties, trade and commerce, lending and borrowing, marriage and divorce, punishment for crimes, the rules for a just war and the conduct of war, and other matters.

In contrast to this, the Gospels contain no social teaching in the sense of rules and laws for the governance of society. For Jesus had no political power or responsibility. He lived in an occupied country under foreign rule, that of Rome. And he seems to have expected the end of the present Age to come quite soon, within the lifetime of his hearers. The existing society would then be swept away and God's rule established on earth. The early church, as reflected in the letters of Paul, continued in this belief, which however we see gradually fading over the decades as the End failed to come and the Christian community had to come to terms with life in a continuing and increasingly hostile environment. But in Jesus' teaching the supposed imminent end of the Age meant that it was not within his horizon of concerns to formulate laws for an independently organised national state. Principles of social justice and peace are certainly implicit in his basic moral teaching, available for the future, and many of the churches today are trying to apply them to society, but in Jesus' own teaching they remained implicit. It was only four centuries later, after Christianity had become the religion of the Roman empire, with church and state being now virtually one, that Christian bishops and abbots became political authorities taking part in the governance of society.

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An important question that arises for both religions is whether the social norms and practices of Christianity in the Roman empire, and of Islam in its first decades after the Hijra, are divinely intended for all time, or were specifically for those historical situations. In the case of Christianity, some of the laws and social norms developed in Roman times and the subsequent centuries are today regarded as relevant and valid today whilst many others are not. Many have been left behind in the past because they presupposed a culture and a state of human knowledge which they have been superseded. For many centuries the churches persecuted and murdered Jews, and there was a time when they lived much more safely under Islamic rule. Again, for many centuries Christians believed in witchcraft, and thousands of women identified as witches were persecuted and many killed. This latter would count as murder today. At one time people who questioned any of the established doctrines of the church were labelled heretics and many were burned or hanged. This would also count as murder today. For two and a half centuries, until the abolition movement beginning in the late eighteenth century, British and American society, supported in this by the churches, accepted slavery as divinely ordained. Again, more recently, for many years the Christian churches of the dominant Dutch Reformed tradition defended apartheid in South Africa on biblical grounds. And all these practices were incompatible with the basic moral teaching of Jesus about valuing others as you value yourself and about reflecting the divine love and forgiveness in our dealings with others.

And so within Christianity today except, as I must add, within much of the very large highly conservative wing, we distinguish between on the one hand Jesus' own ethical principles, and on the other hand the fallible and changing rules adopted by different Christian societies in different places and at different times. And I would

pose the question whether the same basic distinction may be in order within Islam. This would be in accordance with those Muslim scholars who distinguish between the basic religious truths revealed in the early Meccan suras, which are eternally valid and relevant, and the later development of social legislation for the Muslim community in Medina and in the second Meccan period in a cultural, political and historical situation which no longer exists today. It would also be in accord with the development of our human understanding of what justice and fairness mean. For I understand that many Muslim thinkers, condemning the practice of slavery in the past within Muslim societies, now maintain that this was specific to a particular epoch and that its abolition, which was not then possible, has since become timely. The eternal validity versus the continuous adaptability, of past social practices is, I know, a controversial question within Islam, but my impression is that such elements of the shariah as the stoning to death of someone taken in adultery (not found in the Qur'an itself), is on the statute books in Iran but, I understand, not in fact practiced. The cutting off of a thief's hand does have a basis in the Qur'an (5: 38). This is practiced in Saudi Arabia, and is on the statute books in some other Islamic countries, including Iran, even though today, I understand, very seldom actually carried out. It was a pre-Islamic practice that was accepted at the time of the Prophet, but it derives from a time and a society in which there were no prison systems such as exist today, in which graded punishments are possible by means of longer and shorter prison sentences. I imagine that in due course, as legal systems evolve, such extremely harsh practices will be left behind.

At any rate, it seems to me as a non-Muslim who has nevertheless made some amateur study of the Qur'an, that its most powerful and pervasive message is of Allah's unfathomable grace and mercy. As you know, every single sura invokes the

name of Allah *rahman rahim*, gracious and merciful, and there are throughout numerous statements such as that ‘If you follow the path shown by God, He will give you a standard, and overlook your sins, and forgive you. God is abounding in benevolence’ (8: 28), and injunctions such as ‘Repel evil with good. Then you will find your erstwhile enemy like a close, affectionate friend’ (41: 34), or ‘Those who are helpless, men, women, and children . . . who do not know the way, may well hope for the mercy of God, and God is full of mercy and grace’ (4: 98), or ‘Beg your Lord to forgive you and turn to Him. Indeed [He] is compassionate and forgiving’ (11: 90), Allah is ‘all-forgiving and merciful’ (2: 54), with very numerous other verses of the same kind. Allah is as infinite in mercy as in power. Should not this fundamental message of Allah’s grace and mercy then be reflected in the norms and laws of Muslim societies?

There is, I should add, the same message within Christianity of the limitless love of God, and the same failure to mirror this at many points in the behaviour of Christian countries throughout history. There is today nothing Christian about the destruction of Iraq or the treatment of prisoners in the Abu Graib prison in Baghdad or in the American prison at Gauntanamo Bay or in American support, strongly encouraged by President Bush’s huge fundamentalist constituency in the United States, for the Israeli treatment of the Palestinians. And yet many such things, within both faiths, have been defended on biblical or on qur’anic grounds. In my opinion we all need to be open to new ethical insights as the state of human society develops.

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‘Fundamentalism’ is used sometimes to describe a state of mind, sometimes a way of understanding sacred scriptures, and very often the conjunction of both. As a state of mind it is dogmatic, intolerant, constantly seeking to impose itself on others,

and readily inclined to verbal and sometimes physical violence. This mentality can be found within every one of the great world religions, and also, I would add, in purely secular societies. For in this sense, there can be fundamentalist atheists, who have no scriptures. As a way of understanding scripture, fundamentalism is uncritically literalistic, taking no account of the human circumstances within which revelation occurs, and always selecting some scriptural verses as authoritative whilst ignoring others that conflict with them. We are familiar within Christianity with the term 'Christian fundamentalist', meaning those who are fundamentalists in both senses, and I personally prefer the equivalent term 'Muslim fundamentalist', when it applies, to the term 'Islamist' which is today the widely used in the west. Within Christianity we don't call our fundamentalists 'Christianists' or 'Christianityists'. And likewise I would prefer to speak of Muslim fundamentalists than of Islamists because 'Islamist', applied to violent extremists justifying their activity by a selective use of the Qur'an, suggests that they represent authentic Islam. I can understand how it is that oppressed peoples, whether in Palestine or in Iraq or elsewhere, faced with the overwhelming fire power of tanks and helicopter gunships, resort to the desperate forms of resistance available to them, including suicide bombing, first practiced by the Japanese kamakazi pilots in the second world war. But when this ceases to be a form of warfare and becomes a form of terrorism, targeting innocent men, women, and children I cannot see that it can ever be morally and religiously justified. The son of a friend of mine was killed in the Bali bombing in 2002, which has been attributed to 'Islamist' extremists. He and his friends were completely innocent non-political civilian tourists. And to kill them, as part of a general opposition to the west, was to my mind beyond justification. I would say the same of the indiscriminate shelling

and bombing of cities in which great numbers of civilian men, women and children are being killed by the armies of Christian nations.

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Let me now turn to theological questions. First, concerning Jesus. The official Xian doctrine, finally established at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE, is that Jesus Christ was both God and man, having two complete natures, one divine and the other human. This doctrine involved the further doctrine of the Trinity, with Jesus as God the Son, the second person of a divine trinity, incarnate. This has been the orthodox Christian belief ever since, with those in the past, and indeed today within the Catholic church, who have questioned it often being persecuted as heretics. In recent decades however, in the light of the modern historical study of the New Testament and the early history of the church, there has been a good deal of new thinking and re-understanding. It is now widely agreed among New Testament scholars that Jesus himself, the historical individual, did not think of himself as divine and did not teach anything like the later doctrine of the Incarnation. The New Testament sayings in which Jesus seems to claim divinity, such as 'He who has seen me has seen the Father', 'I and the Father are one', 'I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me', are all in the fourth gospel, the gospel of John, and it is widely agreed that they cannot responsibly be attributed to the historical Jesus, but are words put into his mouth by a Christian writer around the end of the first century, some seventy or so years after Jesus' time, and expressing the developing faith of the church at that time.

There is no reason why you should be familiar with the names of contemporary Christian biblical scholars, but let me very briefly quote just a few. The ones I shall quote are all personally firm believers in the orthodox doctrine of the

Incarnation; but nevertheless they do not believe that Jesus himself taught it. Referring to the fourth gospel sayings which I have just cited, the doyen of conservative New Testament scholars in Britain, Professor Charles Moule of Cambridge University, wrote, ‘Any case for a ‘high’ Christology [that is, one affirming Jesus’ divinity] that depended on the authenticity of the alleged claims of Jesus about himself, especially in the Fourth Gospel, would indeed be precarious’ (*The Origin of Christology*, 1977, 136). Then a former Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey, who was also a distinguished New Testament scholar, wrote quite bluntly, ‘Jesus did not claim deity for himself’ (*Jesus and the Living Past*, 1980, 39). And one of the leading generally conservative British New Testament scholars today, Professor James Dunn of Durham University, says that ‘there was no real evidence in the earliest Jesus tradition of what could fairly be called a consciousness of divinity’ (*Christology in the Making*, 1980, 60). Indeed in the earliest gospel, that of Mark, Jesus is reported as saying, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone’ (Mark 10: 18).

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I come now to the term ‘Son of God’. Again, modern historical scholarship has thrown important light. We now know that the term ‘son of God’ was a familiar metaphor within Judaism. Israel as a whole was called God’s son, Adam was called God’s son, the angels were called sons of God, the ancient Hebrew kings were enthroned as son of God and we have in the Old Testament the enthronement formula : ‘Thou art my son. This day I have begotten you’ (Psalm 2: 7); and indeed any outstandingly pious Jew could be called a son of God, meaning someone who was close to God, doing Gods’ will, perhaps with a special mission from God. But within Judaism this was quite obviously a metaphor. Jesus himself used it in this way when he

said that we are to forgive our enemies ‘so that you may be sons of your father who is in heaven’ (Matthew 5: 45). Again, in the prayer that he taught we address God as ‘Our Father who is in heaven’, for in this metaphorical sense we can all speak of God as our Father. But what happened in the period between Jesus’ lifetime and the full development of the trinitarian doctrine, is that the metaphorical son of God was transformed in Christian thinking into the metaphysical God the Son, second person of a divine trinity. It is this development that is questioned by a number of Christian thinkers today.

Within the very early church a division soon began between the original Jewish Christianity based in Jerusalem, which continued for a while as a new movement within Judaism, seeing Jesus as a human being with a special divine calling, and on the other hand the Pauline development which took the Jesus movement far beyond Judaism into the Hellenistic world and exalted Jesus to a divine status. From then on the dominant Christian theology was done in Hellenistic terms. But the great Christian historian Adolf von Harnack, followed by others, has argued that the Judaic Jesus movement lingered on further east, into Syria and possibly to the borders of Arabia, its ideas being known even more widely, and that their picture of Jesus as a great servant of God may well have been known in Arabia in the time of the prophet of Islam. This is uncertain, and a matter of debate among the historians, but the understanding of Jesus within Jewish Christianity was very similar to the picture of him in the Qur’an. So much so that some have speculated that the Prophet’s own knowledge about Jesus may have come from this source.

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My own understanding of Jesus as a human being rather than as God incarnate (or as the second person of a divine trinity incarnate) differs from the Qur’anic

understanding of him only at two points. One is the doctrine of the virginal conception of Jesus by Mary. We read in the Qur'an 'She [Mary] said: "How can I have a son, O Lord, when no man has touched me?" He [an angel] said: "That is how He decrees a thing, He says 'Be', and it is' (2: 47). This is similar to the story in Matthew's Gospel, 'When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit' (Matt. 1: 18), and again in Luke's Gospel (Luke 1: 25). However in the New Testament as a whole the story has a very slender basis, occurring only in these two relatively late Gospels, eighty or more years after the event, and seems to be unknown to all the other, mostly earlier, New Testament writers. For this reason, together with the fact that miraculous birth stories tended to gather around great figures in the ancient world – for example, the Buddha, Zoroaster, and various figures in Greek and Roman religion - many New Testament scholars today doubt its historicity. Following them I myself do not affirm the virginal conception of Jesus.

The other point at which I differ from the Quran'ic account of Jesus is in his crucifixion. As you know, this account says that 'they neither killed nor crucified him, though it so appeared to them' (4: 157, or 155 on a different arrangement of the text). And the reason for this, I presume, is the idea that so great a servant and messenger of God could not be killed by human hands. If I may enter into a non-polemical discussion about this, I would point out that in the Qur'an we read (3: 144), 'Muhammad is only a messenger; and many a messenger has gone before him. So what if he dies or is killed! Will you turn your back and go away in haste?' Could not this same principle be applied to Jesus? Historically it is very difficult to dispute the qur'anic verse since presumably it would not be possible for observers at the time to tell the difference between Jesus being crucified and his only appearing to be

crucified – unless what is suggested is that someone else was crucified in his place. But any historical evidence that there is, both in the New Testament and also in non-Christian Roman references (Josephus and Tacitus), indicates that he was indeed executed by the Romans, who were very efficient executioners. For more orthodox Christians, who believe that Jesus' death was necessary as an atonement for human sin, and that his resurrection demonstrated his divinity, this is a vital issue. But because, together with many other Christian scholars today, I do not myself believe that Jesus' resurrection was a bodily event, or that his death was a necessary atonement for human sin, whether he died on the cross is not a vital theological issue, although as a matter of historical evidence I believe that in fact he did die.

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I do not however reject the idea of divine incarnation in all its possible meanings. The sense in which I use it is its metaphorical meaning. In English we often use the word 'incarnate' as a metaphor. We might say, for example, that Winston Churchill incarnated the British will to resist Hitler in 1940 – meaning that he embodied it, that it was expressed in him in an exemplary way. In this metaphorical sense, whenever a human being carries out God's will in the world we can say that in that action His will becomes incarnate, or embodied, on earth. I know that the word 'incarnation' is alien to Muslim discourse, but I would suggest to you that the *concept* is not, the concept of God's will being embodied in human actions. For Islamic discourse includes such metaphors as 'Soul of Allah', referring to Jesus, and 'the Blood of Allah', referring to the third Shiite Imam; and in the Qur'an itself there is the metaphorical term 'the Hand of Allah'. Some Christians today, although a minority within the theological community, use the term 'incarnation' in this same

metaphorical way. Indeed one of my own books, for which a new edition is now in course of publication, is called *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*.

There is another important theological difference between Islam and orthodox Christianity. This is the Jewish-Christian doctrine of the primal fall of humanity, resulting in 'original sin' from which redemption is needed by the blood of Christ, versus the Islamic belief that we are weak and fallible creatures, needing God's forgiveness, which comes purely by God's grace. However not all Christians today affirm original sin and the need for a vicarious atonement. I myself, along with many others, and following the early Christian thinker Irenaeus rather than Augustine, take the view that humanity was created as a weak and immature creature capable of growing through our experience of life in this world towards the beings ultimately intended by God.

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So, finally, for I have already spoken for long enough, there are forms of both Islam and of Christianity that are incompatible. And there are also forms of Islam and of Christianity that are different but not incompatible. They are such that they can exist side by side in peace and in mutual enrichment. My own work as a Christian theologian has been within the reforming movement in contemporary Christianity. As within Islam, this is at present a minority position, strongly opposed both by the Vatican in Rome and by non-Catholic evangelicals and fundamentalists. But I believe in the long-term power of thought to bring about change. I believe that in time mainstream Christianity will come to see itself, not as the one and only true faith, but as one among a plurality of true faiths, Judaism and Islam being others, even though there will probably always be a continuing fundamentalist element in the

church which rejects this position. And I venture to hope that an equivalent long-term development is also taking place within Islam.

c John Hick 2005

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