

**THE CHRISTIAN
UNDERSTANDING
OF GOD**

THEO 331 – week 9

THE VARIOUS “ISLAMs”

- **The two main branches of Islam: Sunni (approx. 85%) and Shia (approx. 15%)**
 - The difference arose in disputes regarding the rightful successor to Mohammed. Sunni Islam sees the succession in the caliphs chosen after Mohammed’s death. Shia Islam sees it in members of Mohammed’s family.
- **A major spiritual movement within all Islam: sufism.**
 - Most mainstream Islam is theologically concerned with teaching right conduct. Sufism proposes that a right relationship with God is also important.

THEOLOGICAL SOURCES

- **The core theological source is the Quran, said to have been dictated to Mohammed by the angel Gabriel.**
- **Additionally, the hadith (“sayings”) attributed to Mohammed or illustrating aspects of his life are authoritative.**
- **Two other sources: ijma (consensus of the community); and qiyas (Sunni: analogical reasoning) or aql (Shia: deductive reasoning)**

REJECTION OF POLYTHEISM

- The core theological concern within the Islamic understanding of God is the rejection of polytheism. The greatest sin is that of *shirk* (“association”), setting up other gods or “partners” alongside God.
 - Surely Allah does not forgive that anything should be associated with Him, and He forgives what is besides this to whom He pleases; and whoever associates anything with Allah, he indeed strays off into a remote error. (Surah 4: 116)
- In general, Muslim critiques of the Christian understanding of God propose that Christians believe a form of *shirk*.

PHILOSOPHY AND ISLAM

- Early Islamic civilization rediscovered the Greek philosophers and produced great commentaries of their works. These Islamic philosophers were called the *falasifa*.
- al-Ghazali (d. 1111) opposed the naturalism of the *falasifa* and wrote a book called *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*. He rejected the rationalistic approach to investigating the nature of things, including God's nature.
- While Averroes (d. 1198) later wrote *The Incoherence of the Incoherence* as a rebuttal, al-Ghazali's approach has tended to dominate since then.
 - It is seen as superior to preserving the transcendence of God.

GOD'S NAME

- **In Islam, God is called Allah, from the roots “al-” and “ilah”, meaning “the god”. The use of “al-” implies supremacy or uniqueness, like the Greek *ho theos*.**
- **The term Allah is generally considered to refer to the same God that Christians and Jews worship.**
 - **Our God and your God are One: and it is to Him we bow. (from Surah 29:46)**
 - **We worship and confess the same God though in diverse forms. (St. Gregory VII to the King of Mauritania, c. 1080)**
 - **“Allah” is used by Arab Christians to refer to God.**
- **Critiques of this notion usually depend on the idea that Allah was a god worshipped in Mecca prior to Mohammed, or that the description of Allah is quite different from the Biblical portrayal.**

CONDESCENSION AND TRANSCENDENCE

- Islam cherishes the notion of God's absolute transcendence: the declaration "God is One!" is more than saying "There is only one God" – it is a statement of complete transcendence (and omnipotence).
- While God has revealed his will, his nature remains hidden. This is considered positive as helping to prevent *shirk*.
- To be sure, for mainstream Islam the idea of others participating in the divine nature is absurd.
 - For example, the notion that we are created in the image and likeness of God is generally rejected.
 - Sufism, however, does seek a direct experience of God.
- Even the revelation to Mohammed was not direct, but was mediated by an angel.

GOD AS CREATOR

- Islam affirms, like Judaism and Christianity, that God is the creator of all. However, God does not so much sustain creation as re-create it continuously. Things do not possess a stable nature in themselves, as that would imply a less-than-total dependence on God (and risk leading to shirk).
- All events therefore flow directly from the will of God. God does not merely permit them, he causes them.
 - God cannot be said to cause “evil”, however, because things do not possess the independent nature required to be able to judge “good” and “evil”. It is the divine will that declares good and evil.
- While there are divergent views, mainstream Islam tends to deny the existence of free will in favour of fate (*qismah*).
 - The exercise of free will would seem to establish an authority outside of God.

GOD IN RELATIONSHIP

- **Within Islam, the concept of covenant is seen quite differently. As God is totally transcendent, and only his will can be known, the appropriate response to God is submission (*islam*) to that will. A *muslim* is “one who submits”.**
 - Rather than servility, mainstream Muslim thought sees this submission as a source of dignity: to be a “slave” to God is to be a “slave” to none other.
 - It should be noted that Sufism proposes that it is possible to go from submitting to God to loving God.
- **For Christians, the goal of covenant is an eternal relationship with God in heaven, seeing him “face to face”. In Islam, Paradise is a place of perfect human fulfillment, but which God continues to transcend.**
 - In Islam, God offers blessings and reward. In Christianity, God offers participation in the divine nature.

LOVE AND WRATH

- Christianity proposes that “God is love”, and therefore must find a way to explain the Biblical exposition of the “wrath of God”.
- As Islam presents a view of God’s will, but not God’s nature, its view is that “God is loving” (with love usually represented as mercy).
 - This love is not unconditional, however, and so may be “turned off” at will: “Allah loveth not those who do wrong” (Surah 3:57). This contrasts with the Christian maxim “Hate the sin, love the sinner.”
- The key debate: is love a form of weakness, or a form of strength? Is God’s inability to not love (as understood by Christianity) a deficiency in the divine will?

THE WORD OF GOD

- **Both Islam and Christianity have a concept of the “Word of God” as a heavenly reality.**
- **In Islam, this is typically understood as a replica of the Quran in heaven: “Surely We have made it an Arabic Quran that you may understand. And surely it is in the original of the Book with Us, truly elevated, full of wisdom.” (Surah 43: 3-4)**
 - There is some debate as to whether the Quran is created or eternal.
- **In Christianity, the logos comes to humanity, not as a book, but as a man (the “Word made flesh”).**
 - The Quran does call Jesus a “Word of God”, but in the sense that he is a perfect prophet and therefore perfectly presents the word of God.

THE TITLE OF “FATHER”

- Recall that, of the three Persons of the Trinity, one is completely unbegotten: the one designated as *ho theos* (God, properly speaking), and who holds the relational title “Father”.
- The Arabic term “allah” most closely corresponds to the term “*ho theos*”. In Islam, however, the title of father is not found among the “99 most beautiful names” applied to Allah.
 - Strictly speaking, one must be a father to someone. Given the complete transcendence of God within Islam, it would be hard to apply this title to God.
- Finally, while Christianity allows that “*ho theos*” can be the source of a trinity, the Quran expressly denies this possibility:
 - Certainly they disbelieve who say: Surely Allah is the third of the three. (Surah 5: 73)

THE TITLE OF “SON”

- Recall that the doctrine of the Trinity became clarified as Christians pondered the Sonship of Christ. The Quran refutes this sonship (and along with it the Trinity) as follows:
 - The Messiah, Isa son of Marium is only a messenger of Allah and his Word which He communicated to Marium and a spirit from Him; believe therefore in Allah and his messengers and say not, Three. Desist, it is better for you; Allah is only one Allah; far be it from his glory that He should have a son. (Surah 4:171)
- This being said, there is often widespread misunderstanding that Christians believe in three gods, or that the Trinity somehow divides God, or that the Son and Spirit are proposed as “partners” to God. Any of these are unacceptable to Islam, but also to Christianity.
- What is really at stake is God’s nature as a relational being. Is relationship something God does, or (more deeply) something that God is?

THE TITLE OF “SPIRIT”

- **While found within the Quran, the term “Holy Spirit” does not apply to Allah. “Spirits” are considered created beings, such as angels.**
- **While Christianity would define God as pure and perfect spirit, God in Islam cannot be considered as “spirit”.**
- **The use of the term “Holy Spirit” in Islam is more generic:**
 - **Surah 19:17 suggests that the “Holy Spirit” as sent to Mary was actually the angel Gabriel.**
 - **Jesus himself is called a “spirit from God” (cf. Surah 4: 117, above)**

THE INCARNATION AND THE CROSS

- In Christianity, the Incarnation is seen as the ultimate form of self-revelation from God. It is not merely God's words that are revealed: God comes to man by the sending of the logos to take on human nature. This occurs by a process of kenosis, or self-emptying, which reaches its zenith on the cross. God is, in his love, in perfect solidarity with the human condition.
- Christians usually point to the necessity of the Incarnation for salvation. For Islam, however, the Incarnation is seen as an unnecessary extravagance. Proper knowledge of God's laws are all that is needed to obey God's will, and this knowledge can be appropriately communicated by messengers (prophets). Kenosis, whether just in the Incarnation or including the cross, seems to contradict the transcendence and omnipotence of God.
- The key questions are: If Allah wanted to, could he become Incarnate? Is the Incarnation really an affront to God's power, or is it a sign of it?

THE ROLE OF CHRISTIAN HERESIES

- In discussion with Muslims, Christians are often struck by how the Trinitarian doctrine critiqued by Muslims is often not the actual Trinitarian doctrine professed by Christians.
- At the time of Mohammed, most people using the term “Christian” to describe themselves were Arians, or members of other heretical sects. Are the critiques of Christian doctrine really of Christian doctrine, or of these sects?
- Arianism, for example, taught that the Son of God was a lesser divinity created by God to be his partner. Both Christianity and Islam reject this as opposed to monotheism, but differently.
- Early Islam also had significant contact with the monophysites, who taught that Jesus had a “mixed” divine and human nature. Again, in Islam this would be an affront to the purity of the divine Oneness.
- It would be simplistic to think that Islamic critiques of Christian doctrine are really of critiques of heresies. But if the Incarnation is theoretically admissible as an act of God’s power, then the doctrine of the Incarnation as understood by Christians today is the logical conclusion to preserve monotheism.