

A COMPARISON OF ISLÂM AND
CHRISTIANITY AS FRAME-
WORK FOR RELIGIOUS LIFE

Informed Christians have learned in our day that Islâm is not a primitive desert religion spread by the sword, for which faith is reduced to fatalism and women have no souls. Yet Christian historians of religion who avoid such gross errors still tend to present Islâm as at best an imperfect and parochial version of Christian truth, lacking any distinctive genius truly worthy of its independent dignity among the world religions. But until modern times, when the Christianity (and Judaism) of Europeans has been radically transformed along with their secular life, Christianity must long have struck an observer from Mars as, compared to Islâm, the relatively localized faith of largely backward lands. Islâm was the vehicle of a complex and sophisticated sense of social order in a varied and highly creative civilization which was expanding continuously until its field of action encompassed half mankind; it was the only one of the major his-

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torical religions which had successfully displaced in large areas other major faiths such as Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism. The Martian observing human history in the later Middle Ages might find it easier to understand why Muslims have looked on Christianity as merely an abortive form of Islâm, as for instance in the approach of those Şûfis, Muslim mystics, who see the perfection of Islâm in its uniting at once the dispensation of Law, which reflects the Majesty of God, and the dispensation of Grace, which reflects his Beauty, whereas Judaism and Christianity are limited to only the one or the other. This Muslim conception is as inadequate, however, as its Christian counterpart. Probably any widespread religious system will find a place for all major types of religious insight and practice and is in its own way complete. Yet, as each system has matured, it has revealed a characteristic persistent pattern of norms in the interrelation and subordination to one another of all the elements embodied in it. If Christians are to perceive the genius of Islâm, it must perhaps be through the comparison of such persistent patterns.

COMPARISON BY PARALLELISM

We commonly recognize as significant, naturally, only what has received development in our own systems of thought, in our own traditions of appreciation. We can see hardly any variation at points where an alien art may take great delight in nuances of distinction but, on the other hand, find it fails to make other distinctions, which we miss. We often perceive other arts chiefly as lacking this or that which we prize in our own—for instance, perspective or naturalism. One common method of comparing religions has been to pick some doctrine or some area of thought which is basic and well worked-out in our own and which must have some importance in others as well, and then to show the various ways in which others adumbrate the truth we have found and yet come short of it. The Şûfî approach exemplifies this to a degree, and there are dozens of such comparisons by modern Christians, Muslims, and Hindus. The other religions, in these comparisons, always appear truncated, and one wonders how intelligent people failed to think of the obvious next step.

But, if we hope to compare the religions as frameworks each with its own inner completeness, this will not always or often be possible in terms of any particular experience or other point of reference central

to both. I believe that in the case of Islâm and Christianity, at least, our purpose can be in part achieved as follows. Motifs and tendencies in each can be identified as contributing to or expressing its special total atmosphere. (I might warn the reader that sometimes I find that even heresies or superstitions indicate the *direction* of a body of thought more succinctly than do guarded orthodox positions—thus it is no accident that a dualistic, “Manichean” tendency has always formed a greater danger in Christianity than in Islâm or Judaism, where Satan is a relatively pale figure.) These motifs and tendencies can be set parallel in the one religion and the other, not in respect of the similarities between any two particulars but in respect of their having a corresponding place in the whole structure. The present parallelism is in seven parts, presented first in terms of Christianity and then of Islâm, with key parallel terms italicized. I shall try to point out, in points one to four, pervasive tendencies in the selection of experience and of problematics; in points five to seven I shall describe, in the light of these tendencies, the more explicit structures of doctrine.

In such a parallel tabulation the two religions are bound to suffer some distortion because the parallelism must presume a certain minimum of common patterning imposed for the purpose. My outline moves from human problems faced, to types of spirituality called upon in facing them, and finally to institutional patterns resulting. Even so much of a patterning is in a measure alien to the native course of religious awareness in each case. Its most obvious point of bias is that it starts from men rather than from God. But for Islâm and Christianity I believe it is not inappropriate—probably less so than in the case of less historically minded religions such as some which arose in the Gangetic plain.

However appropriate the method, it is hard, in any case, to eliminate distortion: to present Islâm intelligibly; or to present Christianity in a way that diverse sorts of Christians will recognize as legitimate; and still harder to do both in such a way that the two presentations will mesh and form a comparison! I hope that my presentation of Islâm is sufficiently true to the broad stream of at least Sunnî tradition, and I hope that my interpretation of Christianity is reasonably neutral and nonsectarian, at least within the Western (Catholic and Protestant) tradition.

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COMMON BACKGROUND OF THE TWO FAITHS

To begin with, the parallelism is perhaps made possible by the fact that there is a considerable range in which these two religions do have a common outlook, where certain characteristic planks of their framework are roughly identical. Islâm and Christianity, together with Judaism, are members of a group which can be called the Abrahamic religions, for all three can trace their faith back to that arch-patriarch. From the Jewish viewpoint Abraham, to whom the great promise was made, is, perhaps even more than Jacob, the common ancestor of Israel. From the Christian point of view, it is he who first took the step of faith which resulted in setting off a special people to the Lord. From the Muslim point of view it is the pure, monotheistic faith of Abraham, who lived before Christians or Jews existed, to which Muhammad was recalling the world after the Christians and Jews had variously corrupted the truths intrusted to them. Christianity and Islâm thus share common historical presuppositions. In both, for instance, Adam, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus are of major importance. This makes their comparison in some ways especially easy but in other ways especially delicate, for we are tempted to take common terms as if they had an actual correspondence in the two faiths, which is often not the case.

Christianity and Islâm have, then, in common the personal monotheism of all the Abrahamic religions, with the trait of giving cosmic seriousness to the historical dimension of human life. Both interpret the transcendent demands for devotion and for high morality which the holy recognize as coming from a single source: God, who is thought of as bringing both our own higher life and all existence whatever into being. The world is thus the creation of one God, who interests himself in each human creature individually, giving to men one life each, and making known to them how he wishes them to worship him and to behave toward one another during it. He will reward or punish men beyond this life according (in principle) to how they have obeyed him or been guilty of disobedience. Thus is set the stage for the religious life, but the two faiths have conceived rather differently the whole course of personal and historical spiritual life which is acted out upon it.

THE CHRISTIAN SIDE OF THE PARALLEL

1. If one had to choose a single vantage point from which a man would find the central themes of Christian teaching to illuminate most problemingly human life and its problems, it would no doubt be in a sensitive *experience of suffering and death*. He must face rooted *evil*: the blank labyrinth of torment, the rottenness in nature. Other aspects of life receive great illumination from Christian thought, but, if just one aspect had to be chosen as most pregnant with insight from a Christian standpoint, we would not set out from the problems presented by human creativity and its self-destructiveness, nor from those presented by human sociality and its inherent contradictions (though, despite their opponents' strictures, faiths like Christianity and Buddhism have not ignored these), nor from the paradoxes of the search for knowledge and truth. Christian thought has found its deepest challenge in the inescapable suffering which brings to life itself its impetus, giving even joy its distinctive flavor. I would say (despite Nietzsche) that it is in this respect above all that Christian religious thought has been not simply religious but most specifically Christian; and it is here that Christianity appears in its best light to the sensitive human observer. This sense of the evil and suffering in life is a thread running through all of Christian doctrine, helping to give a place in a unified whole to its several insights.

2. Even on a casual level we speak pre-eminently of finding *consolation* in our faith. Almost every Christian doctrine serves to make the apparently negative, the destructive, the dying in life bear more searching interpretations. The central event of the Christian story is *Christ's crucifixion* and resurrection, recalled ever since in the perpetually repeated miracle of holy communion, which is the lifeblood of the church. The fact made most strikingly manifest about God is that he suffers; the Christian symbol is the Cross. It is not surprising that Christendom is proudest of its years of persecution, that Christian art has gloried in the martyrs. It is appropriate that in Islamic lands Christians have often been thought of typically as physicians, in the Middle Ages as well as in modern missionary times, and that Jesus appears in their tradition above all as a healer, who comforted the sick and raised the dead.

3. The centrality of the problem of suffering, of the "problem of

evil," is all the more brought out by Christianity's apparent failure to solve it at all. It has, to be sure, its pat answers: that suffering is simply a means to greater happiness, for it will be more than repaid in Paradise, but this is no real answer, as everyone knows, and it is precisely the query, "But how could a good God do this?" that is the classical basis of Christian disbelief. Precisely because Christianity makes so much of suffering, it cannot escape into some conveniently wise solution but presents its adepts with ever deeper layers of "mysteries." Suffering, illuminated by the Christian doctrines of corruption, faith, and love, becomes transfigured almost beyond recognition. From the start Christians are not concerned with mere pain; conceptions deepen in time to the level of "sacrifice" and of "radical estrangement from God." The Christian does not in the end attempt to escape suffering but to give it new meaning. It is accordingly from the depths of suffering itself that he seeks to bring forth that *joy* which is equally inseparable from his faith.

4. With good reason, then, the type of religious experience most favored in Christianity is the personal acceptance of *redemptive grace*, which is to transform the inward springs of life. This is symbolized both in baptism and in the eucharist and illustrated in the inward struggles of innumerable saints, beginning with the classical case of Paul. The redemptive experience, to be sure, is not always carried far in practice: many Catholics have no very different relations to their saints, or Protestants to their hymns, than some heathens are said to have to their fetishes. Redemption remains, however, the accepted norm, in terms of which other types of religious experience tend to be interpreted.

5. With such problems and such experiences dominating its expectations, Christian doctrine traces the course of spiritual life in terms of God's personal *suffering love*, working as grace in history and in individuals, his potential children. We begin history with the sin of disobedience, entailing the guilty *corruption* of the first man and, through him, mankind, who thus became vile to themselves and are thenceforth involved in suffering and death. We see in history thereafter a process of God's *redemption* of men from bondage to this miserable sinfulness. (The crucial question of some Christian evangelists is, "Are you saved?") Redemption is achieved through God's

patient love and forgiveness of a people which responds to his grace, a love culminating in the service and suffering and sacrificial death of his own son Jesus. The Revelation, the divine “word of God,” is at its fullest a compassionate human *Life*, the Incarnation.

6. Sinfulness had entailed, for corrupt men in their unloving perversity, the uncreative, routinized restrictions of a natural social morality, enshrined in the rigor of the Mosaic Law. This *Law is now transcended* through the redemptive love of God, whereby a man is purified and enabled to try to “take up his own cross and follow Christ.” Motivated by the love of Christ, to which they respond in faith, men can seek to act always on the basis of and through the *inward power of God’s free spirit*, which can now replace for his traving child the old un-free Law which had subjected him. If now men succeed, it is through the help of God; and if at times they fail, God forgives and renews his help to his own. Men’s suffering takes on transformed meaning, being shared with God. The measure of human living becomes the *Sermon on the Mount*.

7. Those who have entered into this new life in Christ form a *redemptive fellowship*, the Church, members together in the suffering body of Christ. Every aspect of piety is to be channeled through this fellowship. Its sacred text is the Bible, a record of its own divine origin. The Church is set apart from the un-free “natural” world of sin and misery from which its members are redeemed and into which it is expected to show forth the love of God. It becomes essentially a special *sacramental society* in contrast to society as a whole (even when statistically the limits of the two are coterminous), set off by its sacred mysteries and dogmas, explicitly at variance with the world. Even within the Church at large, in monastic orders or in dedicated sects, again and again the effort is made to realize more fully the ideal of a purer redemptive fellowship. And thus in the end God will replace the darkness of this whole world with his love and light.

Persons brought up in a Christian environment need little persuading to see in the problems of suffering and death, and in the redemptive love which transforms these problems, the deepest dimensions of human life. The European tradition, in contrast to the Middle Eastern, has cultivated such interests since the time of the Greek tragedians. It may remain paradoxical but it does not become silly to see, in the

suffering of Christ from whom springs the redemptive fellowship, a cosmic event, to be interpreted in terms of Trinity and Atonement. But Muslims commonly have not seen the problems of life in this perspective, and it is not surprising that they have failed to make sense of the Christian mysteries. It seems almost inexplicable to Muslims that sensitive and intelligent people should stomach such hocus-pocus as that three is one and one is three or demean themselves to the point of making God ridiculous in the crucifixion. They have explained such phenomena as due to the stubborn conservatism of human minds, a willingness when faced with awkward facts to twist and recombine to the point of absurdity the favorite notions of their ancestors rather than frankly to give them up. They take comfort in the fact that over the centuries there have been innumerable conversions from Christianity to Islâm but very few the other way around, even under the best circumstances for Christianity. They hope that as Christians are exposed to Islamic truth they will come to see the distortions of their inherited views.

THE MUSLIM SIDE OF THE PARALLEL

To a Muslim, to concern oneself with discomfort and mortality may seem hardly manly. The Islamic tradition has shied away from the poignant, from the passionate and the paradoxical in life. Islâm sees itself as the religion of sober moderation, and most Muslims would distrust Paul's grand defiance of reason and of nature or an exaltedly private *credo quia absurdum*. Life is complex and mysterious enough and Muslim thought has not pretended to reduce it to simplicity, but it has tried to keep the clearest and most immediate problems in the center of its canvas.

I. If a choice had to be made of one type of experience which would most effectively prepare a man for what Islâm has to offer, I suppose it would be *facing solemn responsibility* for decisions upon which will depend men's lives and fortunes. The Muslim is ever made aware that creation is *purposeful* and that the slightest deed is of moment. In contrast to stars, pebbles, or horses, men must make choices and answer for what they have chosen. Created things that they are—nay, determined in their very ideas at their parents' knees—yet the whole meaning of their lives lies in how they meet the challenge laid upon them

by the unalterable truths of life. In a striking passage in the Qur'ân we find the challenge depicted: "We [God] proposed the faith to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, and they refused to undertake it, being afraid of it; but man undertook it."

In the general framework of the monotheism which Islâm and Christianity share, the most obvious way to conceive man's central problem is in terms of how he should obey God. Whatever other problems men face will presumably be incidental to that obedience. All else meaningful in human life, all the puzzles of man's nature, are in fact interpretable in terms of his rational responsibility. Accordingly, Christianity also, as an Abrahamic religion, does not lack some awareness of the radical role of human responsibility. In that thought which is most distinctively Christian, however, the problems so raised are both explored and solved in the light of a sense of cosmic corruption, suffering, and love which to Muslim eyes appears paradoxical and evasive. Islâm, on the contrary, has been uncompromising in keeping the sense of cosmic duty unaltered and central, in accord with the straightforward sobriety which seems to characterize it.

The *depth* to which either Christianity or Islâm has probed any given problem is not here in question—only the degree to which a particular awareness has set the tone of the religious system as a whole. And, even on those problems that have least occupied its thinkers, one or the other may have probed more deeply. But, compared to what seems to have been possible in Islâm, Christianity appears to have dimmed and displaced its *emphasis*. The Muslim attitude has wide consequences, and we will find this emphasis an appropriate theme by which to understand all that is most distinctive in Islâm. The sense that men stand under judgment, each act being inescapably right or wrong, runs insistently and undilutedly through all classical Muslim doctrine, orienting all its details.

2. The Muslim seeks not so much consolation as *guidance* from his faith. The commonest prayer of Islâm, repeated many times a day, and often compared to the Lord's Prayer, runs thus:

In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate: Praise belongs to God, the Lord of the worlds, the Merciful, the Compassionate; Master of the Day of Judgment. Thee do we serve and on thee do we call for help; guide us the straight path, the path of those whom Thou hast blessed, not of those upon whom anger falls, or those who go astray.

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The elements of this and of the Lord's Prayer are in fact similar, reflecting the common cosmic setting posited by the two faiths, but in the Muslim prayer the emphasis is shifted characteristically from forgiveness to guidance.

Accordingly, the central event in the story of Islâm—corresponding, for Christians, to the coming of Christ—is the “*descent*” of the *Qur’ân* (that is, its revelation to Muḥammad), a book held to be the very speech of God and eternally inseparable from him. Since that time, this, God's guidance, his present and almost embodied words (not a mere inspired record about him, as are the Christian scriptures) is perpetually in the hands and on the tongues of the faithful, a continuing miracle in its excellence, they believe, which human art is incapable of imitating. At just those points—ranging from solemn worship to superstition—at which some Christians make the sign of the cross, the Muslim will write or utter a Qur’ânic phrase. The most strikingly manifest fact about God is that he speaks to men.

3. As everyone who is acquainted with Muslim theology will be quick to point out, it is precisely in dealing with the problem of human responsibility and freedom over against God's power that Muslim thought appears to have most signally failed. In stressing the inescapability of his judgment and the insignificance of the whims of his creatures apart from his commands, the main stream of Muslim theology has concentrated on exalting God beyond any shadow of rivalry from any created being. The definitiveness of man's duty to him alone is thus expressed, but in the process man seems to have been stripped of his freedom of choice, God being the sole Creator of all things, even of man's acts. Theologians have, in fact, always preserved some form of recognition of human freedom, but the problem has produced long theological quarrels and is reflected in subtle analyses on the part of the Şûfî keepers of Islâm's inner conscience. Perhaps here again we have a case where too living a concern has made impossible a neat solution of the question. In any case, it is in terms of a penetrating interpretation of human responsibility that we must understand Islâm's persistent sense of human *dignity*—a sense that has taken many forms, from the simple believer's imperturbable sense of his own election to the Şûfî doctrine that the greatest saint of any

age, as the microcosmic embodiment of purest rationality, is in fact the pole, *Qutb*, round which turns the whole rational universe.

It must be pointed out that Islamic thought, while holding central an awareness of responsibility and judgment, has not failed to find important meanings in human suffering and sacrifice. Particularly in mystical poetry, the believer, as a lover, weeps over his separation from the beloved, God. In the love story of Majnûn and Laylâ, which has popularly become a religious allegory, Majnûn wastes away in the desert to skin and bones, ready to die for love of the One Beautiful. The theme that God seeks us more than we seek him is present. Again, the patient outreach of a celibate saint like Shaykh Naşîr-ad-Dîn of Delhi could be interpreted by an observer in terms of redemptive grace. But such motifs are subordinated. They are not valued as either capital or essential—Shaykh Naşîr-ad-Dîn felt himself inferior to his great master Nizâm-ad-Dîn Awliyâ', probably a more typical Muslim—and, in any case, they are interpreted in terms which express the supremacy of the law and of personal obligation before God. For the mystical lover, suffering is ordinarily no clue to the nature of God but merely incidental to his service. Even in the chief Shî'ite sect, where the suffering of the descendants of Muḥammad is a major theme and is sometimes interpreted almost in the manner of the atonement, the Law holds its place as more fundamental.

4. The type of religious experience favored in Islâm is, then, the active personal acceptance of *prophetic truth*, which is to discipline and orient one's total life. The most obvious expression of this has been in the attempt on the part of the pious to model every detail of their conduct—down to the material of their clothing—on the reported behavior of the prophet Muḥammad. The whole *shari'a*, the sacred Law, is a concretizing of this principle both as it applies to action and to the permitted formulation of thought. Carried to the level of Şûfîsm, this becomes an ordering of the inward life through a meditation on the words of the Qur'ân as they came to Muḥammad, a meditation so intense that the states of soul experienced by Muḥammad in his penetration of Truth are re-experienced, though imperfectly, by the mystic. In Şûfî doctrine Muḥammad thus becomes a metaphysical figure, the Perfect Man, the transcendent ideal of each individual. But whether within the Şûfî tradition or in the orthodox realm of the outward Law, the ac-

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ceptance of the truths proclaimed through the prophets, and in particular through Muḥammad, becomes an exercise of soul fraught with sighs and tears for those who take their faith seriously—which, to be sure, is not necessarily a greater number than in the case of Christianity.

5. Grounded in such expectations, Muslim doctrine traces the course of spiritual life in terms of God's *transcendent unity* as reflected in history and in individuals, not his protected children but his adult servants. History begins with man's acceptance of obligation to recognize God's unity and the consequent indivisibility of men's duty—which cannot be escaped (as Muslims might suppose Christians to hope) through a divinity divided against itself, one person of which might intercede with another. Men are confronted immediately with God. It is said that when Adam was created all men were drawn out of his loins together and confronted by their creator with the query *a lastu bi-rabbi-kum*, "Am I not your Lord?"—to which all replied in affirmative recognition. Hence as each individual subsequently comes into his appointed time of life, the divine primeval challenge has been given him in his very nature as a man.

When men failed, beginning with Adam, to live up to this challenge, their guilt did not imply the corruption of their nature but rather their *straying into error*. Adam does not feel himself vile and thus hide; he feels himself to be wandering without purpose and asks for help. The remedy is not a personal redemption but divine *guidance*. Adam himself was the first prophet; there is no waiting till Moses. (A Muslim evangelist would ask *a aslamta*, "Have you submitted" to God? Divine guidance does not replace the natural reason but works through it, perfecting it; the Qur'ān has many passages in which a sort of "natural theology" is adumbrated. Nevertheless, reason is not enough; the guidance is necessary in a way that somewhat recalls the Christian notion of prevenient grace. To those who accept it, turning to God in purpose and making true efforts, it is given; from those who turn away it is withheld and they go astray, their natural reason being blinded.

Accordingly, history is seen from the time of Adam as a process of God's making his will clear to erring men and leading them aright. This is achieved through a *series of prophetic summonses to a total life pattern*, a series often thought of as increasingly perfect and certainly culminating in the Qur'ān itself. The Revelation, the divine "word of

God," *kalām, Allāh*, is not a Life as in the Christian paradox but a clearly written *Book*.

The Qur'ān seems to most Western readers impossibly dull reading. To Muslims who read Arabic it has seemed the most beautiful composition in existence—its literary inimitability forming a unique evidentiary miracle which every generation can verify anew for itself. This contrast in attitude rises partly from the inadequacy of any translation and yet more, perhaps, from the way in which the two groups read the book. The Westerner tries to read it at a sitting, to acquire information or possibly for incidental inspiration. But the Qur'ān presents no concrete information and no new arguments; it is repetitious and lacks unity of development. The Westerner soon tires of it. The Muslim reads it, on the contrary, verse by verse. If it is recited at one sitting, this is not for the sake of its contents but as a pious act. (The impious, consistently enough, are rarely encouraged to read it—there are more appropriate ways of reaching them with the truth.) It is read more as an act of homage to God than for information or even for inspiration (though this does enter in); hence the great role of Qur'ān memorization, unparalleled with the Bible. The Qur'ān was so used from the beginning; this is not a case of later devout misuse. The books of the Bible always have their best impact when read as wholes; the reverse is the case with the Qur'ān.

When read as first intended, as a vehicle for worship rather than primarily as an exposition of truths, its very incongruousness and repetitiousness become virtues; that is, almost every element which goes to make up its message is somehow present in any given passage. Its very narratives are not written in the form of stories but in the form of brief, discontinuous statements, holding before the mind the relevance of stories already known or elsewhere explained. Its relatively few legal passages lend themselves more readily to starting a ripple of moral reflection than to subserving technical juridical decisions. Wherever it is opened, the Book is found to be insisting on a single message in every possible context. This message is such that to reaffirm it with one's whole will constitutes an act of worship.

So read, the Qur'ān reveals itself as a comprehensive cosmic challenge, monumentally delivered. It is at once more comprehensive in outline and more involved in the details of individual living than are its closest analogues, the Old Testament prophets, taken in themselves.

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It is rather like a pep talk from the coach of all life—or, rather, a series of such pep talks all run together. It maintains an ultimate perspective on every point that arises, large or small. This it does even verse by verse in its sonorous endings recalling the power or the mercy of God and, more substantially, in the very mixture of passages exalted and prosaic. In Arabic, at least, the exalted passages manage to win out in such contests and give their tone to the whole. This can be seen in the Chapter of Light, which contains the most ethereal passage in the Qur'ân juxtaposed with what might seem some of its most sordid, dealing with matters of etiquette, with sexual decency, and in particular with an accusation of infidelity levied against a wife of the Prophet. The exalted effect is aided by an effective use of language, which lends an untranslatable dignity even to quite ordinary ideas, so that the phrases seem to take on a more general reference; much of real substance is lost when the thought is cast into less noble rhythms in another tongue.

The Qur'ân expresses in this way a total vision of the natural and historical cosmos and of human responsibility therein. This vision is brought out largely in terms of the experience of an individual man (Muḥammad) and of the entire community about him, an experience dominated in turn by the challenge of the very Qur'ân which is its commentary, an experience, moreover, which—both during the Qur'ânic revelations and afterward—was marked by a unique historical success. This intimate interweaving with the far-reaching experience it illuminates, perhaps even more than its single-mindedness and the monumentality of its formal impact, accounts for the enormous power of the Qur'ân as the charter and touchstone of a concrete historical community which has tried in its generations to express the universal.

The Qur'ân in its literary form, then, is to be compared not with the form of the Bible but with the form of the life of Christ, which was likewise interwoven with the life of the early community. All the natural features of the life of Christ, as experienced by the Church, point to a single culminating moment, essentially beyond this world's life, into which all believers are to enter at last. On the contrary, though there is development in the Qur'ân, every moment of it is equally devoted to the reorientation of this life in its very naturalness. The contrast is shown most keenly in comparing what happens to the soul in a reading of the Qur'ân and in a Communion with Christ—

the penetrating of divine admonition on the one hand, on the other the the assumption into divine atonement.

6. In prophecy the ancestral *law and custom of men*, distorted by their error and made pointless by their inturbed pride and their many divisions, *is reoriented toward a universal justice*. The prophetic Law transcends nature, not by replacing the natural condition, but by purifying it and giving it meaning; for nature, forever created anew by God, is not essentially corrupt. The demands of the Law are adapted to man's natural capacities—all children are born Muslims, before their parents mislead them. God's mercy covers the believers and their concerns in this world on much the same basis as in the other. The sense of the dignity of the natural man extends to a certain distrust of the conception of a soul; the soul as a semi-independent spiritual substance is played down, and when the notion of a purely "spiritual" resurrection appears among Muslims it is condemned as a Christian heresy. A man is an organic whole.

As a mere portion of creation, to be sure, a man in himself is nothing. He is at best a concourse of atoms. Insofar, however, as man in his very primeval nature (though he may forfeit this status) is a believer, accepting by God's will the obligations of responsibility laid upon him, he acquires a special noble status among created things. He has inimitable dignity as a servant, *'abd*, responsible before God. The very angels must bow down to Adam. Hence in part the famous "pride" of Muslims, their sense of dignity as believers; as true believers they are in a sense more truly men than those who have corrupted the initial faith.

Hence also the persistent sense of Muslim solidarity against such as have not yet believed. For the obligation laid upon men is above all that of ordering the world aright. This the Muslim community must do jointly. Not only individual believers but the prophetic community as a whole is blessed in this life and the next, destined to rule over all the world—including the older, corrupt communities of men. The true believer is the *vicegerent of God in the creation*.

Every Muslim is responsible for "commanding the good and forbidding the wrong," on the basis of prophetic truth, in the community where he finds himself. Hence, the measure of human living is the *jihād*, *the social struggle*. The *jihād* is in the first instance the struggle

with the enemies of the believing community—the “holy war” (a war, it must be recalled, the purpose of which is not in principle normally conversion but the establishment of an Islamic social order within which non-Muslims have their place). But the attitude extends to the struggle to purify the life within the community. Perhaps the most frequent use of the concept in major campaigns has been on the part of reformers within the Islamic society—or of rulers who used reform as an excuse for war on other Muslims. (Finally, the “greater *jihād*” refers to the struggle of a man against the passions within himself.) The truest Muslim is he who devotes his life to extending, in every sense, the sway of truth.

The full response to the prophetic summons on the part of the believer, accordingly, is a serious effort to achieve the pattern set by the Prophet, to achieve it for himself in particular but also, and as a necessary consequence, for his people and for mankind as a whole. The results indeed are up to God; what counts is a man’s striving, his purpose—his single devotion; if in trying he makes a mistake, he is credited with the effort.

The Şûfîs in their insistent meditation of prophecy find still deeper aspects of the believer’s condition. Men are responsible not only for outward acts but for an inward recognition of God’s single and undivided sovereignty. The importance of such a recognition may take precedence over that of any act. It is said that Satan refused to bow down to Adam when the angels were so commanded and was therefore damned. Some Şûfîs have explained that he was refusing to worship other than God even at God’s command and under penalty of God’s punishment; he chose to revere God from Hell rather than compromise his devotion. In the end Satan will be acknowledged as the truest of all the angels. It is through such single-mindedness that the believer, who as creature is simply nothing, at last becomes united in knowledge and love with God, who is all Truth. But, as on the level of the *shar’i’a*, the individual experience is only the starting point. Beyond the outer solidarity of the sacred Law, Şûfîs have seen an inward solidarity in which every person, in the measure of his personal approach to God, comprises a part of a great invisible hierarchy whose summit is formed by the *Quṭb*, the supreme saint, the Perfect Man of the age, in whose microcosmic existence human society is fulfilled—

and with it the whole of creation. Thus human vicegerency in the world takes on not only a historical but a metaphysical aspect.

7. Islâm, with its *jihâd*, is in fact, on earth, a universal and never-ending personal and social struggle. The first men who entered into this struggle emigrated from their homes in Mecca to form a new community on a prophetic basis at Medina. Ever since, those who have responded to the prophetic summons have undertaken to help maintain what has been in intention a *total political society built upon prophetic standards*, which is ultimately to be the order of the whole natural world. Every aspect of piety is to be channeled through this total brotherhood. There is private prayer, but it is subordinated to the public prayer, which is not a communion to redeem the communicant but above all an act of recognition of God's common lordship through recitation of the Qur'ân. The community's text is the *hadîth*, a record, like the Bible, of the community's history, but the *hadîth* concentrates not on a personal divine intervention but on Muḥammad's prophetic decisions as norms for everyday living. Lives of Muḥammad as such, however highly revered, did not become canonical.

The community is not a sacramental body set off from a profane world—there is no church in the Christian sense, nor are there any ordained priests. Whether in the law of inheritance or in that of marriage or in that of ritual ablutions, whoever in a given company of believers best knows the sacred Law is in principle the authority for the occasion. The community is ideally a single *homogeneous brotherhood with a common witness* and with a common mission to purify the world, incumbent equally on every believer and at every moment. In contrast to the Christian tendency to hierarchism, Muslims have had an equally persistent tendency toward a radical egalitarianism. So important is the unity of social life that, even when the mystically inclined retire in some degree to their contemplative lives, they have been expected to continue to fulfil all social obligations and, in particular, to marry.

In pursuit of this common mission, Muslims have insisted on social criteria for the community's identity more than on doctrinal and sacramental ones. Theology, in the broad sense of intellectual discipline of the experience of faith, has been intensely cultivated. Yet dogma and especially creed in the narrower sense have been neglected as compared

with Christianity, in which they form the intellectual aspect of a sacramental relationship. Membership in Islâm is not through a sacramental rite but through visible allegiance to common symbols—the recognition of Muḥammad as prophet and, above all, of Mecca as *qibla* in prayer. Granted these essentials, considerable scope is allowed for variation in personal convictions and even in cult practices. (In thus replacing a ceremonial tie among its members with one essentially symbolic, Islâm seems to reflect a highly developed level of abstraction. Here we have a further instance of the relative remoteness of Islâm from primitive world views with their magical realism. The same may be said of its insistence on the unity of nature and of social life in contrast to the ancient dichotomy between everyday reality on the one hand and the sacred, mysterious realm of dream souls on the other.)

Since every political problem is in principle in the fullest sense a religious question, the source of the earliest and most abiding doctrinal disputes (notably that between the Shî'ites and Sunnîs) has not been the interpretation of subjective experience but the form to be taken by community leadership. Each of the faithful has a personal obligation to decide for himself what government is legitimate—a question which has led to such subordinate questions as how sinful a man must be to disqualify himself as a ruler or even as a Muslim. It is typical that wherever Islâm has gone, from the very beginning, there has been an unremitting concern to preserve the history of the community. This has not been ecclesiastical history, nor has it been based, as has sometimes been the case in Christianity, on a sense of progression of divine dispensations from age to age, with overtones of cosmic drama. The Muslims have indeed their eschatology, but they have not allowed all history to be subsumed in an eschatological romance. Their religiously inspired chronicles have been concerned with how the Muslims have fulfilled their responsibilities in various worldly circumstances and have traced throughout its vast areas the continuity of the community and the solidarity of its witness from generation to generation.

This concern repeatedly takes an active form. Again and again in every age, at the hands of theologians recognized as raised up for the special needs of each century (*mujaddids*) or, above all, under the lead of militant reformers and conquerors, the effort has been made to remold Islamic society nearer to its ideal. It is with a sense of historic

mission that new *mahdis* campaign against the corruption of the religious leaders themselves as against all worldly injustices.

The ritual of the public prayer is emblematic of the community sense of cosmic purpose. Though in daily life distinctions other than those of piety—in principle the only distinction allowed—do creep in, five times a day but particularly in the great gathering on Friday, pious merchant and beggar pray side by side in the ordered rows of worshippers, with identical disciplined words and gestures. Each carries out the whole prayer for himself but in unison with all his brothers. And once a year as many as are able go on pilgrimage to Mecca to join with the wider community from all the world in the common rituals at the Ka'ba.

THE INDIVIDUALITY OF THE TWO FAITHS

After the contrast brought out by such a parallel tabulation, it is worthwhile recalling that the everyday piety of most people seems to depend more on class position and individual personality than on religious affiliation. What we have traced is a set of ideal tendencies which are always influencing the direction piety takes and which largely account for the peculiarities of each tradition. Since these are in some measure the extreme tendencies, those most distinctive of each faith, the wide overlap even in ideal orientation is no doubt not fully brought out here.

Nevertheless, the tabulation can suggest explanations for some significant misunderstandings between Muslims and Christians. In fact, the comparison can be summed up in terms of the most serious difficulties which informed adherents of each religion are likely to find in the other. These difficulties reach very deep. Such a summary will underline the need for caution in any attempt to settle the debate between the two faiths by assimilating the two into a common basic plan which one of them may perhaps fulfil more adequately than the other.

At this point we may enlarge our perspective a little to prevent a possible misunderstanding. Among the great universal religions, Christianity and Islâm are members of a larger group, the Western religions, which contrast with those which arose in or were influenced by India. This Western group includes the three Abrahamic faiths and also another family, associated with Iran, which includes Zoroastrianism and Manicheanism. All these faiths have been in constant contact and fre-

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quent interchange with each other. In contrast to the religions of the Gangetic plain, they all see the human story as proceeding within a single world from a moment of creation to a final universal judgment. Accordingly, there is sufficient similarity among them to give certain contrasts validity.

We may thus try to reduce the contrast between Islâm and Christianity to something more generic and therefore simpler to evaluate, by selecting two types of basic faith. These may be labeled (rather unjustly) "the this-worldly" and "the other-worldly." On this basis, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, and Islâm are this-worldly in contrast to Christianity and Manicheanism. It is a temptation, then, for Christians (countering Manicheanism on a different level) to turn against Islâm (or Zoroastrianism) the same formula they have used since Paul against Judaism as a legalistic, unspiritualized faith. But the essential incommensurability of two faiths is not just a matter of one such contrast but of all aspects of their spiritual frameworks at once. Islâm contrasts, from this point of view, as radically with Judaism or Zoroastrianism as with Christianity.

Medieval Judaism and Islâm do have much in common which markedly contrasts with Christianity, and up to a point the difficulties of mutual intelligibility are indeed alike as between Islâm or Judaism on the one hand and Christianity on the other. Islâm may well have developed on the basis of Jewish rather than Christian notions of what a religion should be like. For Christians (and Manicheans) a religion is a sacramental church with a sacred dogma *acting upon* a profane world; for Jews and Muslims and Zoroastrians it is a body of universal law and a community which is bound thereto and which *is* the world at its best. Such a distinction is radical.

But the Islamic sense of mission is quite different from that of Judaism (or Zoroastrianism). Islâm did not turn itself into an Ishmaelism corresponding to the Jewish Israelism, despite apparent temptations to do so. (The Qur'ân might have seemed to allow this, and social history favored it.) Both in its belief that every people has received prophets and in its belief that with the coming of Muḥammad the whole world is to be reordered on the basis of God's word, Islâm rejects the crucial notion of a "chosen people" witnessing to God as a select scattered remnant on the earth and replaces it with a unique concentration on the prophetic personality of Muḥammad and his

universal message. The Law, therefore, is no longer an expression of fidelity to a people's peculiar truth but more nearly a practical instrument of universal politics. It is deliberately made feasible for the ordinary community of men and regarded as sound mundane practice at least as strongly as ritual. This contrast in sense of mission between Islâm and Judaism is as far-reaching in its implications as is the similarity in their ways of conceiving a religious community. (Here, where Islâm and Judaism differ, there is an apparent similarity between the all-inclusive universalisms of Christianity and of Islâm, but from another vantage we see that precisely at this point the New Israel, with its sense of its own divine election from the unregenerate world, stands nearer to the old Israel than to Islâm, with its world-ordering social vision.) The contrast between Christianity and Islâm, then, must be understood independently of that between Christianity and Judaism, even if at times along corresponding lines.

Although Zoroastrianism under the Sassanians made, indeed, something of the same universal political claim as is found in Islâm, Islâm does not merely perpetuate a Middle Eastern tradition as a continuer of Zoroastrianism. The latter faith was founded on priesthood, monarchy, and social hierarchy; historically it was more oriented to agriculture than to trade. Its basic problems were again different. The uniqueness of Islâm, as of no other faith, is irreducible.

Leaving aside other contrasts as raising still other difficulties, we may sum up the mutual complaints of Islâm and Christianity in terms of the nature of the spiritual process, of the religious community, and of the divine being. The great stumbling block for Muslims—as for the Jews whom Paul had in mind—is of course the doctrine of the Trinity and all that is associated with it in expressing God's suffering love: incarnation, crucifixion, atonement. In teaching these intricacies, Christianity seems unfaithful to the transcendent unity of God. On the other hand, Christians see in this difficulty of Muslims an evidence of the essential unperceptiveness of Islâm and are bound to feel that all Paul's objections to the Jewish Law apply equally to Islâm with its *shari'a*.

Christians want to transcend the suffering and guilt implicit in the human condition and have found redemption in Grace; to them, Islâm, with its exaltation of the words of a book, of formulated rules, shows too little insight into the infinite variations and self-contradictions of the human spirit, as if Islâm supposed that to know and will the good

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sufficed for effective goodness, and as if it submerged any further concern for human individuality beneath a demand for an ideally static social conformity. Yet it is precisely the concern of Islâm for society as a whole that may seem from a Muslim viewpoint to show its superiority. Muslims want to fulfil the purposiveness in creation and have found divine guidance to this end in prophecy; they must feel impatient with what seems the Christians' asocially subjective preoccupation with individual personal problems, when such problems can be given their proper perspective only in a faith that is not afraid to cope with the great problems of world order.

Christians object that to build one's community on the Law of a Book rather than on a Life of Love means running the risk of having a society lacking in flexibility and an ethic which not only fails to evoke the highest in human potentialities but is even tainted with violence, with servitude, and finally with rigidity. Yet Muslims have retorted that the Christian fellowship in effect leaves other social institutions to the sphere of ungodliness, that the revered Christian ethic, in which personal tenderness nearly excludes historical concern, is not only subjective but unrealistic for the ordinary man and lacking even in any challenge to greatness of achievement. They may suspect that the whole redemptive system of which it is an indissoluble part is actually founded on an escapist irrationalism which, overwhelmed by life's sorrows, seizes on bright moments of faith as if they were the whole of life.

Christians see in the unyielding inviolability of the Qur'anic God, author of good and evil, an invitation not only to fatalism but to a disregard of the inherent inconsistencies and tensions within existence, which give living its tragic, personal meaning. Muslims see in the personal involvements of a Mediator within a Trinity sentimental, wishful thinking which leads to a compromise with truth and, in consequence, a failure to appreciate the full vital meaning of human responsibility.

On each side, what most seriously shocks the other is not a secondary development but an essential aspect of the religious experience. Without it, nothing is left of a concrete way of worship but only, at most, some fine general words and sentiments. The two positions are therefore incompatible; each, from the other's point of view, is untenable. This is not just a matter of selected key dogmas but, as we have seen, of the very structure of faith. In each faith—and the same would be

true of Judaism or of Zoroastrianism—all its various elements, whatever their separate strengths or weaknesses, fit together to build up its total orientation, an orientation already present in the basic spiritual experiences most cultivated by each, centering on which gives them their consistency and strength, whether the personal acceptance of redemptive grace or that of prophetic truth. Without this over-all orientation which endows their legitimacy, the separate details lose much of their validity and can even be accused of falsity.

It is obvious that it will not be easy to reduce the two faiths to a common denominator allowing a facile syncretism or an eclectic choice of what might seem most desirable in each. Any common ground would not include all the essentials and perhaps not anything essential in any serious, concrete sense. But for this very reason, the more mildly conciliatory positions which nevertheless claim superiority of one faith or the other are also not easy to maintain. One religion can hardly absorb the traditions and insights of the other into its own more encompassing fold, as some Christians have lately suggested. For this also requires some sort of common ground which should include, in a positive way, if not all the essentials, at least some of them. But what is and is not essential depends upon the integrating principles of each faith; and these are in contradiction. Only in some genuinely higher synthesis—which cannot be said to be currently available—might a true unity be possible.

POSSIBLE OBJECTIVE WAYS OF JUDGING THE TWO RELIGIONS

With our initial dilemma thus confirmed, we must remind ourselves that it is not easy to escape the uneasiness of the confrontation by a return to a simple dismissal of one or the other religion, at least if that would suppose some objective judgment of their relative ultimate value. The instinct of sensitive men is still justified in avoiding this. There are no satisfactory criteria for weighing the two faiths that do not depend upon one's own religious convictions—in effect, upon the orientation of one faith or the other.

Even “fruits” are an unsatisfactory basis for such a comparison. In the eyes of most of the world, after all, the events of this century have shattered the pretensions we Europeans once had to moral superiority, yet without giving others any grounds for complacency.

A comparison of depth of insight carries us little further. At least if

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the great Şûfî systems could be left aside, one could gain an impression of Islâm as a sober, balanced faith but one relatively confined to the common-sense level, while Christianity would present a possibly eccentric profundity. But for the medieval period when the faiths are most properly comparable, before the conditions of the modern world forced retrenchment or re-evaluation of the heritage in both faiths, a subtle Şûfî thinker like Ibn-al-Arabî can no more be excised from Islâm than an Augustine from Christianity. And if a man like Iqbâl in modern India does not yet present a challenge on the level of a Kierkegaard (or a Buber) in the modern West, still we cannot rule out the possibility of a major Muslim cosmo-political thinker, as free of apologetics as of literalism or of communal exclusivism, when Islâm shall have more fully and freely entered into modern life. (In comparing any non-Western cultural channel with those of the modern West, an appeal is inescapable to potentialities envisaged as future for better or worse!)

In any case, of course, the "depth" of a tradition cannot confidently be sounded from outside. Even within the faith few persons can claim to have begun to exhaust its potentialities after a lifetime of devotion; it should take even more than two lifetimes to compare the two faiths directly. The problem of comparing two devotional traditions are much greater than those, say, of comparing two musical traditions, if only because a devotional tradition requires an effective allegiance which a musical tradition does not.

One might compare dependence on elements of objective falsity (granting the possible validity of religious insight as such). Those long pointed out in the Christian system have received careful and often honest attention from Christians. Muslims, and not only Muslims, sometimes too readily assume that in this regard, at least, Islâm is relatively free of nonsense. But Islâm has probably been neither more nor less than Christianity bound up with untenable human conceptions. Perhaps a Christian can be forgiven for believing that a unitarian deity, despite the apparent simplicity of the conception, presents an even more difficult metaphysical problem than does a Trinity. But even on the historical level the interpretation of Easter and Pentecost presents a more limited (if also a keener) problem than does the interpretation of the whole of the Qur'ân and of Muhammad's prophetic life in cosmic terms. It is not so much any particular earthly facts that cause diffi-

culty—as that Muslims, like Christians at least till modern times, have been tied down by a timid literalism, certainly alien to Muhammad's own spirit, which has refused to recognize fully the degree to which Muhammad's life and the Qur'ân itself were bound up with the level of understanding prevalent among the Arabs of Muhammad's time. This literalism has obscured the extent to which the wider, living prophetic tradition of the Middle East in fact contributed to the illumination of the Qur'ân, the production of the sacred Law, and even the formation of the revered figure of Muhammad himself as it appears in *hadith*. Especially among some modern Muslims, an unreal, romantic conception of early Islâm results. But the falsities resulting from this literalism require in principle (for those who have come to see its limitations) only courage for them to be torn away. The essentials of the Muslim tradition could presumably survive the abandonment of a great many untenable details, provided it retains, with whatever modifications, its historical anchorage and is not simply diluted to a generalized idealism.

Even a comparison of the relative success of the two faiths in their own different terms, so far as this is visible historically, is likely to be indecisive. Both faiths have their characteristic failings. Muslims have preached social order, but their most obvious failure, to the outside observer, has lain in their recurrent inability to establish sound, enlightened government. Christians have preached love, and one of the most striking features of their history, at least before recent times, has been their inability to maintain fellowship even within the Church. Christianity has been marked by more and deeper bitterness of schism and persecution than has any other religion. In each of the two cases the failure could in part be traced to the very form in which the faith embodied its ideals. The rigid association of the Muslim Sacred Law with a particular historical situation in Muhammad's Arabia was a laudable effort to avoid dissipation into uncontrollable theorizing, but it surely hindered the flexibility required for effective application of the Law elsewhere. Likewise, the insistence of the Church on doctrinal and sacramental uniformity, for the sake of maintaining a sacred fellowship free from distortions, gave wide scope to the most unredeemed passions. But in each case the failures have been only partial and have been largely subject to extraneous historical influences positive and negative.

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Muslims and Christians are not only in no position to judge one another; probably, in fact, both groups have much growing to do before there can be full spiritual fellowship between them. This fact should not hinder an active search for such fellowship as is attainable. But this search will not necessarily be furthered by facile solutions. Only with a recognition of the need for the intellectual tension that comes from recognition of unresolved truth—the suspended judgment of the concerned man, not that of him who has given up seeking—are we likely to undergo the necessary creative growth. If they wish such growth, Christians and Muslims must learn to seek truth together even while retaining as few pleasant illusions as possible about their unity.

Meanwhile, we Christians can at least consider what such a parallelism as that here attempted, for all its distortion, may suggest about our own faith. In focusing our attention, in some sort, on suffering and sacrifice, we may at least have risked seeing other aspects of spiritual life slightly out of focus. In stressing the experience of grace and in choosing the redemptive fellowship as channel for our spiritual life, we may have had to understress or to distort the experience of rational responsibility and to forego or postpone the goal of a prophetically integrated civil order. It can be charged that from the beginning we have had to explain away prophecy, as Paul seems to have done by making it a mere witness to the mission of Christ, and to keep a strict check on any purely personal mysticism lest it dispense in the end with the Mediator. These two complementary channels of transcendent challenge have on the contrary become central to Islâm and have created in it a whole spiritual world which we find alien and not fully comprehensible.