

The Doctrine of God and Male-Female Relationships in Christianity and Islam

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Recently I heard a young pastor express his concern regarding the increasing number of marriages between young Christian women and young Muslim men in Kenya. In Nairobi, he said, many young Christian women believe it is acceptable for them to marry Muslim men, for—as they claim—“Christians and Muslims worship the same God.”

But is it true that Christians and Muslims worship the “same” God? Is “Allah” just another name for the God of the Holy Bible? Or are there important differences between the God of Christianity and the God of Islam? In this essay, I will show that Christians and Muslims do *not* worship the same God. In addition, I will show how the differences between Christian and Muslim beliefs about the nature of God have major consequences for male-female relationships.

I write from a Christian perspective as a Christian theologian. I am not a scholar of Islamic studies. Therefore, I will focus primarily on the Christian doctrine of God, showing how the Christian view of God, in contrast to the Muslim view of God, promotes equality between men and women by encouraging mutual giving and receiving in the context of loving relationships.¹

The Christian God of Love and Relationship

In order to better understand how our doctrine of God affects our view of self and others, we must stretch our minds in order to think our way into the very heart of God. According to the Holy Bible, the sacred text of Christianity, “God is love” (1John 4:8, 16). That is, God’s “being” or “nature” is “love.” God’s basic attitude toward the world is an attitude of “love,” expressed in divine self-giving for his creation.

In his great treatise on godly “love,” recorded in the New Testament (1Corinthians 13), the apostle Paul explains that “love” is “patient” and “kind.” According to Paul, “love” does not “envy” or “dishonour” others. “Love” is “not self-seeking.” “Love” is “not easily angered.” It “keeps no record of wrongs.” Notice that Paul describes love in *interpersonal* terms; that is, he describes love in terms of *relationship*. Love cannot exist apart from relationship, for *love requires another*. That is, there must be at least one to give love and another to receive love.

To assert that love is *relational* brings us to the heart of the Christian doctrine of God. The God of Christianity is the Holy Trinity: “Father, Son and Holy Spirit”—three equal divine *persons*, who eternally exist in an intimate *relationship* of “love.” God is eternally a Father loving his Son and a Son loving his Father.² In addition to their mutual love for one another, the Father and Son enjoy a shared love for the Holy Spirit. The love that is shared among the three persons of the Holy Trinity is expressed in an intimate relationship of mutual *giving* and *receiving*. The mutual giving and receiving among the Father, Son and Holy Spirit reflects both the *equality* and *distinction* of the three persons of the Holy Trinity.³ The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are *equal* in their divinity: that is, each divine person is fully “God.” At the same time, each divine person is *distinct* from the other: the Father is not the Son and the Son is not the Father; likewise, the Holy Spirit is not the Father or the Son.⁴

The Christian belief that God eternally exists in a *relationship* of three equal but distinct divine persons, who express their love in mutual giving and receiving, has vast implications for human beings. According to the great Christian thinkers of the past, we cannot truly know ourselves until first we know God. The Christian doctrine of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, eternally united in a relationship of “love” provides the clue to the meaning and purpose of our lives. By its

very nature, love cannot be contained; love must reach out to *another* in order to express itself. Because God *is* “love,” God reaches out to humanity in order to *share* his love with us. God created us in an act of overflowing love in order to share the joy of divine life with us forever. Because we are created to share in the life and love of the Holy Trinity and to enjoy the riches of God’s blessings forever, the proper Christian attitude toward God is *gratitude*, expressed in praise and thanksgiving.

The Muslim God of Power and Submission

In contrast to the Christian view of God as “three divine persons” who eternally exist in a relationship of “love,” the god of Islam is a *one-person* deity, who exists in eternal solitude. According to the Quran (Surah 2:163; 6:19), Allah is “numerically and absolutely one.”⁵ Allah has no “equal” or “partner.”⁶ Unlike the loving Father of Christianity, Allah has no son to love. Because he has no equal with whom he can enjoy either mutual or shared love, mutual giving and receiving in the context of loving relationships is foreign to Allah’s “being” or “nature.” Because he eternally exists alone, in isolation from relationships, Allah *cannot* be eternal love, for love requires *another*. Whereas the God of Christianity relates to the world in love, Allah relates to the world through *power*. The word, “Islam,” means “submission.” The appropriate response to the Islamic god of “power” is *fear*, expressed in absolute, unquestioning *submission* to the will of Allah.⁷

The many differences between the God of Christianity and the god of Islam may be construed in terms of the fundamental difference between “love” and “power.” “Love” seeks to *give* and *receive* in relationships defined by equality and diversity. “Power” seeks to *dominate* and *control* in hierarchies defined by inequality and conformity. This basic difference in views between the Christian God of “love” and the Muslim god of “power” has far-reaching implications for male-female relationships.

Male-Female Relationships: A Comparison

The Christian doctrine of God provides the foundation for understanding the proper relationship between men and women. According to the Holy Bible, human beings are created in the “image of God”:

So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them (Genesis 1:27).

When God created human beings in his “image,” he created them as “male and female.” In other words, “man” and “woman” *together*—that is, in *relationship* to one another!—constitute the “image of God.” Since God exists in an eternal relationship of love among equal but distinct divine persons, the “image of God,” as embodied by human beings, involves *relationship* between beings who are both *equal* (both are human) and *diverse* (male and female). In regard to the relative status of men and women in the order of creation, “woman” is afforded *equal* status with “man,” for both male and female together constitute the “image of God.” In the Christian view of male-female relationships, “man” and “woman” exist as fully equal but complementary partners *from the beginning of creation*.

The Christian doctrine of God shapes our view of male-female relationships. For Christians, God is a fellowship of equal but distinct persons eternally related in a fellowship of love. Human beings are created in the image of God as male and female to reflect the fellowship, equality and diversity of the Holy Trinity.⁸ The equality and diversity of men and women ideally facilitates an egalitarian but richly diverse society, where opportunity, personal growth and happiness are equally available to all—regardless of sex. In a properly functioning Christian social structure, both men and

women enjoy equal opportunity not only in regard to personal choice in marriage but also in familial, professional, academic and other important aspects of life.⁹

In contrast to the Christian view of equality between men and women, however, Islam asserts a marked *inequality* in male-female relationships. In the world of Islam, men and women do *not* enjoy equal status; rather, men are regarded as “superior” to women.¹⁰ Given their “inferior” status, women’s lives are dominated and controlled by their male relatives—including husbands, fathers, brothers, uncles and even distant male cousins.¹¹ In regions and nations ruled by *shari’a*, or Muslim law, women are not allowed to own property or to participate in the political process. Muslim women are valued primarily in terms of their sexuality, specifically their ability to bear children—especially sons. A Muslim woman’s value is based on her virginity. A woman who loses her virginity outside the context of marriage is devalued in Islamic society because she brings shame and disgrace upon the *men* of her family—including her father, brothers, uncles and even more distant male relatives. Virginity is prized in the world of Islam not for the honour it brings to a chaste woman but as a safeguard to *male* pride. A woman who “disgraces” her family by sexual promiscuity may even be murdered by her own relatives!¹²

In order to safeguard female virginity, Muslim men deny women access to the marketplace. Even adult women may be confined to their homes and allowed access to a wider social context only when accompanied by a male relative. Because their primary function is to bear sons, Muslim women are denied education; hence, many Muslim women remain functionally illiterate and ignorant. When outside the home, many Muslim women are required to wear *burkas*, or coverings, over their entire bodies. While these coverings are intended, at least in principle, to safeguard female virginity, they, in fact, negate women’s humanity by rendering them effectively invisible! Islam essentially reduces women to the status of *non-persons*. The Muslim male obsession with virginity reduces women to the status of property to be protected, like a donkey or a prized goat.

The inferior position afforded women in Muslim society is the inevitable consequence of the Islamic doctrine of God. The *required* human response to the Islamic God of “power” is absolute submission and unquestioning obedience to the inscrutable will of Allah. A theology of absolute power and total submission facilitates a social hierarchy of authority and submission, most clearly evident in Muslim marriages. In Muslim marriages, wives are required to submit to the will of their husbands with the same unquestioning obedience that believers are required to offer Allah. Wives who do not submit to their husbands’ authority with unquestioning obedience may be beaten, imprisoned or even killed.¹³ The hierarchy of power and submission inevitably leads to violence. Violence against women is common in Muslim societies. Muslim women who have escaped their social-marital imprisonment and have immigrated to the West are unveiling the abuse of women that is an inherent part of the Muslim social structure.¹⁴

Muslim social structure reflects the Islamic view of a god of “power.” Since “power” seeks to dominate and control, Islamic social structure is inevitably based on a hierarchy of power and authority from “above,” where ruthless dictators dominate and control society at large, clergy dominate and control believers, and men dominate and control women.

A Christian View of Marriage

Unlike Islam, Christianity affords women equal status with men. In the New Testament, the equal status of men and women is a fundamental aspect of Christian marriage. In his important treatise on marriage (Ephesians 5:22-28), the apostle Paul admonishes his readers—both male and female!—to “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” In contrast to Islam’s demand for wives’ total submission to their husbands, *mutual* submission as a sign of reverence to Jesus Christ establishes the foundation for Christian marriage. Paul continues:

Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

According to the New Testament, wives should “submit” to their husbands “as the Church submits to Christ,” for the husband is the “head” of the wife. If the apostle Paul had finished his teaching at this point, one could argue that the place of women in Christianity is little different from the place of women in Islam. In contrast, however, to Islam’s hierarchy of power and control, where female submission is a consequence of male “superiority,” Christianity views submission in the context of the relationship between Christ and his Church; that is, submission is a *response* to sacrificial “love.” Paul continues:

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.

According to the New Testament, husbands are to love their wives “just as Christ loved the Church and gave himself” for her as a sacrificial offering. Whereas wives are taught to submit to their husbands in response to sacrificial love, men are instructed to *give* themselves to their wives in sacrificial love—in *the same way* that Christ loved the Church and gave himself for her! Clearly the greater burden of marital responsibility is upon husbands, who are taught to give themselves in sacrificial love in order to protect, nurture and enhance the well-being of their wives.

The Attitude of a Servant

The command for sacrificial giving by husbands is a direct reflection of the character of God, as revealed in Jesus Christ. In the New Testament, the apostle Paul writes:

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset [attitude] as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:5-8)

In our *relationships* with one another we are to have the same “mindset” or “attitude” of self-giving love as Jesus Christ. The Son of God took the position of a “servant,” humbling himself in sacrificial love and giving his life on the cross for the sins of the world. This “servant” attitude is attested in the teachings of Jesus. He said: “Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant” (Matthew 20:25-27). Jesus reveals that the heart of God is the heart of a “servant.” In stark contrast to the absolute monarch of Islam, who wields unbending “power from above,” Jesus Christ, the Son of God, offers himself for the world in humble self-giving and sacrificial love. Jesus reveals that God is a “Servant-King,” who expresses his power in terms of *love*, pouring himself in self-giving for his creation.¹⁵

Because we are created in the “image” of God, we too are created to express our love through sacrificial love for God and others. Our willingness to love and serve others is a direct reflection of the heart of God, in whose image we are created. Just as God offers himself in sacrificial love for the world, we too are to offer ourselves in self-giving for others. We see, therefore, that the Christian

doctrine of God expresses itself in our daily lives in terms of mutual love and reciprocal service, where giving and receiving in the context of relationships—whether marital, familial, or communal—is a reflection of the heart of God in whose image we are created.

Summary

Ideas have consequences. Our ideas about the nature of God, whether “love” or “power,” will be reflected in our most important relationships—especially the relationship between men and women. Whereas power seeks to dominate and control, thereby dehumanizing others, love seeks to serve and empower, so that the personhood and well-being of others is nurtured, preserved and enhanced. Whereas power brings personal stagnation and communal suffering through violence, love brings personal flourishing and social cohesion through mutual giving and receiving in the context of communal harmony and peace.

In Islam, where the relationship between God and humanity is one of absolute power and total submission, human relationships are arranged in a hierarchy of power, authority and obedience—whether at the level of marriage, family, community, tribe or nation. In Christianity, on the other hand, where God is viewed as a loving Father who gives his beloved Son to save the world from sin (John 3:16), healthy human relationships are built on a democratic, egalitarian framework of mutual giving and receiving—particularly at the level of marriage, family and community. Our doctrine of God, therefore, is immensely important to our daily lives, for it shapes the way we interact with others at the individual, familial, and communal levels.¹⁶

Of all God’s gifts to humanity there is none greater than *love*. God has demonstrated his love for the world by sending his Son to be our Saviour (John 3:16; Romans 5:8; 1John 4:9, 10). The Christian view of God encourages us to respond to God’s love for the world as revealed in Jesus Christ with gratitude, expressed by loving love one another with the self-giving love that God pours out for the world. Therefore, let us love one another as God loves us (1John 4:11).

Effects of Doctrine of God on Male-Female Relationships

	Christianity	Islam
Nature of God	love and relationship	power and submission
Divine attitude toward world	sacrificial giving	absolute power
Human response	gratitude	fear
Social structure	egalitarian, democratic	inequality, totalitarian
Male-female relationships	equality in diversity, mutual submission	inequality, male domination-female submission
Social consequences for women	personal flourishing in family, education and profession	personal stagnation: child bearing (sons) housekeeping illiteracy

ENDNOTES

¹ This essay is not intended as a blanket indictment against all Muslims. As a Christian, I believe that God the Holy Spirit is lovingly at work among many Muslims, drawing them to the bosom of the Father and Creator of all as revealed in Jesus Christ. In this essay, however, I do intend to show the harmful consequences of the Islamic view of God in regard to male-female relationships.

² To say that God is “Father” does not mean that Almighty God is “male.” God is not an “old man” with a long white beard. God transcends the limitations of sex and gender, possessing all the loving characteristics of both a father and a mother. Jesus Christ, on the other hand, is male. While he is the fully divine Son of God, he is also the fully human son of the Virgin Mary.

³ According to the Christian doctrine of the Holy Trinity, God is “Father, Son and Holy Spirit”: three distinct, equal divine persons, united as “one God” in a “relationship of love,” expressed by mutual giving and receiving.

⁴ Each person of the Holy Trinity is *equal* in divinity: that is, Father, Son and Holy Spirit are equally “God.” At the same time, Father, Son and Holy Spirit are three *distinct* persons, each with his own unique way of relating to the world.

⁵ Robinson, S. *Mosques & Miracles: Revealing Islam and God’s Grace*, rev. ed., (Upper Mt Gravatt Qld, Australia: City Harvest Publications, 2004), p. 188.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Like Muslims, Christians are taught to “submit” to the will of God. Submission to the God of “love,” however, has very different consequences for human relationships than submission to the God of “power” (*see below*).

⁸ The implications for human relationships of the *equality* and *diversity* (“distinctness”) of the persons of the Holy Trinity extend beyond male-female relationships to include relationships among tribes, ethnic groups and races. At a variety of levels, God has created human beings to express the diversity and equality of the Holy Trinity, in whose “image” we are created. Perhaps the greatest earthly reflection of the unity and diversity of the Holy Trinity is the Christian Church—a diverse body of believers from all nations, ethnic groups, races and socio-economic classes united (at least ideally) in an egalitarian fellowship of love.

⁹ History shows that the Christian Church has not always reflected the equality between men and women that is the logical consequence of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. Such failures, however, reflect the shortcomings of the sinful human heart rather than an inherently deficient doctrine of God.

¹⁰ Robinson, p. 176. According to Robinson, the Muslim belief in male “superiority” finds support in the Quran (*see* Surah 4:11, 176). Male “superiority” continues even in the afterlife, notes Robinson. Faithful males are promised innumerable sensual pleasures in heaven, including the sexual pleasures of perpetually virgin maidens. In contrast to the sensual delights awaiting men in the afterlife, however, one Islamic tradition holds that women may find salvation only under their husbands’ feet!

¹¹ For much of what follows, I am indebted to Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a Muslim native of Somalia, who immigrated to the West to escape an arranged marriage. Ali was elected to the Dutch Parliament. She is an outspoken critic of the abuse of women not only in traditional Islamic countries but also among Muslims who have immigrated to the West. *See* Ali, A.H. *The Caged Virgin: An Emancipation Proclamation for Women and Islam*, (New York: Free Press, 2006 English Translation).

¹² “Honour killings,” or incidences of social-sanctioned murder designed to protect family (i.e., *male*) pride, occur even in the West among Muslim immigrants.

¹³ Likewise, in Muslim families, daughters who do not obey their fathers’ absolute authority may be beaten, imprisoned or killed—with no legal or social consequences for the male perpetrators of violence!

¹⁴ Violence against women is not only prevalent in countries or regions ruled by Muslim law (*shari’a*). Even in the West, violence against women is widespread among Muslim immigrants.

¹⁵ The God worshipped by Christians is the Almighty Creator of heaven and earth, whose power is unlimited, whose wisdom is without measure, and who is present in all places at all times. Although God is almighty, however, God has chosen to save his creation from the destruction of sin by the power of *love* expressed at the cross of Jesus Christ. In redeeming his creation by self-sacrificing love, God reveals that love is finally the greatest power of all (1Corinthians 13:13).

¹⁶ Many marital and familial problems easily arise when a Christian woman marries a Muslim man. The New Testament cautions Christians against being “yoked together” with unbelievers (2Corinthians 6:14).