Sin and Atonement as seen by Muslims and believers in Jesus

Crime and sin are related concepts in most cultures and they damage society in such a way that those involved in crime, such as murderers, robbers, swindlers and other sorts of criminals are sought out and, when caught, are punished by the state. Sin, on the other hand, is usually ignored by the police and by judges. But sin also causes pain to those sinned against. Even more fundamentally, sin mars the relationships of men, women and children with God. The cumulative effect of sin is separation from God.

Our Muslim friends take into account the moral acts of evil and have a complex system of dealing with those who do acts contradictory to Islamic law (Sharia). The moral aspects of sins are also acknowledged by Muslims, but as believers in the Lord Jesus, we would not acknowledge or recognise that their punishments are justified. For example, in some Muslim states you can be arrested and put in prison for eating in public during daylight hours in Ramadan. My wife was beaten on her legs by a religious policeman for "loitering" in a women's market.

But by and large, Islam largely ignores the spiritual impact of our sins on us even though this is the most crucial aspect of sin! When Joseph was tempted by Potiphar's wife, he refused saying, ***"How can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?"***.(Gen. 39:9)

Sin is breaking God's law. God's law is not a rigid arbitrary code. It is bound up with God's character of holiness and love. Just as there is joy in heaven when one sinner repents, so there is grief for every sinner who persists in opposing God. The Quran rightly says, *"Whoever comes to his Lord as a criminal, has as his portion the fires of hell, he will neither die in it nor live."* (Sura 20:74) But crime is only one form of sin. Any sin can sever our relationship with God.

Several terms are used in the Quran for sin – sin, offence and guilt. But sharp distinctions are not features of Quranic thought. There are other terms that apply to sexual lapses (Sura 17:33) or straying from the true path (Sura 93:6-8) or infidelity or rejecting Muhammad's claims to be a prophet.

Here are some Quranic expressions that have Biblical counterparts:

- *Tawbah* (repentance) occurs in 32 ayats. For example, *"That Allah may forgive your guilt both past and present."* (Sura 48:1-2) This text is similar in some ways to the Lord's Prayer. But there is no hint in Muhammad's version that we should forgive others in response to God's forgiveness of our sins.

  Istighfaar (seeking forgiveness) is the route to *Tawbah* see Sura 4:110, *"And whoever does a wrong or wrongs himself but then seeks forgiveness of Allah will find Allah forgiving and merciful."*

  Further, there is an admission of Muhammad's own failure and there is the expectation of future guilt on his part. The blessing of forgiveness remains a hope within the Quran, but it never becomes a firm assurance since it lacks the guarantee that the Bible requires, ***"Without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin."*** (Heb. 9:22) We read in Sura 26: 51, *"We hope that the Lord will forgive us our sins, as we are the first among the believers."*

- Regarding greater or lesser sins – we are familiar with the Roman Catholic classification of sins into the categories 'mortal' and 'venial'. Islam has a similar division of great sins and small sins. The great sins will land you in hell if not repented of in this life. As for the lesser sins, God is expected to 'wink' at them and let them pass. But in reality does our Holy God ignore any sin however trivial it might seem to us? Muslim scholars differ about which are the greater sins and which the lesser. Some of the greater sins for Muslims would not strike us as serious sin – i.e. usury (*riba*). There are Quranic verses that prohibit the charging of interest. At that time there was often a practice of doubling the debt if the borrower defaulted. Islamic lawyers prohibit any

loan contract that specifies a fixed return to the lender, for this is an unearned profit. This is at the heart of Islamic banking. No interest is paid on loans.

Other serious sins are drinking wine and running away from battle.

Here is a list that appears in the Hadith:

- *Shirk* – associating other beings with God
- Magic – getting involved in the occult including aspects of 'Folk Islam'
- Murder
- Usury (*riba*)
- Depriving orphans of their property
- Running away from battle
- Falsely charging a Muslim with adultery

Is there a text in the Quran that speaks explicitly of original sin? There is a passage that mentions the tragic event of Adam's Fall, *"Allah said to Adam and Eve, 'Do not go near the tree lest you be wrongdoers,' but Satan made them slip and drove them out."* (Sura 2:37) So apparently "The Fall" was Satan's fault and this first sin is not regarded by Muslims as 'original sin' transmitted to all future generations of mankind.

The Islamic version is that Satan was the one who punished Adam and Eve after deceiving them. No indication exists in the Quran that sin is extensive, inherited and total in its infection of the whole human race. Nor is there any text in the Quran that is similar to, ***"The wages of sin is death"***. (Rom. 6:23) The Quran offers no rationale for death nor does it attribute death to the sin of Adam and Eve.

Sin viewed in this way is bound to be marginal, especially as God guides whom he will and misleads whom he will. So in the Quran there are no texts about the total corruption of mankind and nothing to indicate the solidarity of the whole human race in its Fall. The Quran does emphasise the evil tendencies in mankind, *"The soul inclines towards wrongdoing."* (Sura 12:34) As far as a direct diagnosis for sin, we only find this in the Bible. For example, ***"I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me"*** (Ps. 51:5) and ***"They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice …"*** etc. (Rom. 1:29-31)

So in the Bible sin isn't a superficial disease, but a radical disease that leads to death – both physical death and spiritual death. It can't be rooted out or cured by any means at all except by 'a heart transplant'. God says, ***"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you."*** (Ezek. 36:26)

Muhammad failed to recognise the seriousness of sin. This was quite the opposite of the Apostle Paul. Paul claimed that he was blameless before the law, (Phil. 3:6) but he also cried out, ***"I know that nothing good lives in me, that is in my sinful nature. For what I do is not the good I want to do, no, the evil I do not want to do, this I keep on doing."*** (Rom. 7:18-19) This power preventing us from doing what we know to be right Martin Luther called 'the bondage of the will'.

It is true that the Quran does mention repentance and the 'One' to whom we need to repent, but there is no suggestion of anguish going with true repentance – the sorrow and tears experienced by both King David and Peter the Apostle. The Quran says that repentance is not for evildoers who at the approach of death say, "I am repenting." But we can draw comfort in remembering the dying thief on the Cross and his last hour conversion.

So in Islam, sin is primarily the transgression of some ceremonial prohibition or some doctrinal error, rather than the concept of profound moral pollution. The greatest sin is *"shirk"* (association) – the theological term for associating someone or something with God or putting someone or something in the place of God and so, by implication, becoming a polytheist.

So while there is a moral aspect to Islamic law, it is also true that Islam's test in religious matters is never essentially moral.

A Biblical understanding of the Atonement

There is no doctrine of salvation in Islam – no new "heart" – no fresh spiritual experience. Indeed the word "salvation" is never used in the Quran. There is a near synonym *'najar'* which only occurs once. (Sura 40:44) It is in the context of Moses speaking to an Egyptian about deliverance. When talking to your Muslim friends you may find that nearly always they are speaking of avoidance of sin rather than deliverance from sin and its power or its presence. This is a diluted concept of deliverance. If sin exists, forgiveness is somehow still available and there must be a means of procuring pardon. This is usually called 'atonement' or 'expiation'. Islam seeks to work out what appears to be an unreliable case of expiation to give some weight to the forgiveness from God that it hopes to find.

Let us begin with the phrase, "God loves". This is not one of the beautiful names of Allah (a list of the attributes of Allah). But there are seven significant verses that mention God's love.

- Sura 2:122, *"God loves those who repent and are circumcised."*
- Sura 3:159, *"God loves those who rely…"* (presumably on Him)
- Sura 5:196, *"God loves the generous."*
- Sura 8:59, *"God does not love the treacherous."*
- Sura 9:4, *"God loves the pious."*
- Sura 28:76, *"God loves those who are exultant."*
- Sura 28:77, *"God does not love the corrupt."*

We don't say that these statements are false, but we can say that they are inadequate.

The Gospel tells us that God loves the world – the whole of mankind. (Jn. 3:16) He loves us not because we repent or are circumcised nor because of our piety or our reliance on Him, but because it is **His essential nature** to love the unlovely and unloving. He cannot but love and pour out His love through the Holy Spirit. He loves those who need His grace – even criminals and persecutors and the mischievous.

This boundless love of God must run parallel with His holiness and justice as regards to sin. He has to judge sin and punish it and then make expiation for it to forgive us our sins.

The word "atonement" (*'Kippur'* in Hebrew) means 'to cover'. And what God covers, He blocks out. He has chosen to do this by the blood of His Son which is like red liquid which is applied to a stain and effectively removes it all together.

The word *"kaffara"* (derived from the same root as the Hebrew *'kippur'*) is found 15 times in the Quran these passages warrant careful study. Clearly there is a link between forgiveness and atonement, but Muslim theologians don't bring out the distinctions between these two fundamental concepts. Some Muslim theologians say that atonement means covering or hiding of sin.

Muhammad is reported to have said, "If you do a bad deed, do a good one beside it to wipe away the first." While the notion of "blotting out" is acceptable, we cannot agree that a good deed can ever erase a bad deed. What good deed, for example, could ever wipe out the stain of murder or adultery?

Here are a few ayats from Sura 5 that may shed some light on this issue:

- 5:46 *"Eye for eye and whosoever waves his rights shall find expiation."*
- 5:13 *"Lend God a godly loan and I will expiate your evils and admit you to Paradise."*
- 5:90 *"Allah will not take you to task for your vain oaths but will do so for those taken in earnest. The expiation of that is to feed ten poor people or to free a slave. But whoever lacks such means, let him fast three days. That is the expiation of your sworn oaths."*

We can infer from the above that almsgiving, releasing slaves and fasting are means of expiation. What is not clear is whether such expiation is for individual sins or whether such expiation actually

entitles the Muslim to enter into heaven. Perhaps Muhammad himself was not sure of the efficacy or the extent of such haphazard expiation.

Again in Sura 5:96 it is written, *"Expiation that consists of feeding the poor or an equivalent fast remits the guilt of the murder."*

Prayer too is a means of expiation, *"Observe your prayers in the morning. Good deeds will drive out evil ones."* (Sura 11:114) It is clear from the above that, to our Muslim friends, atonement has much to do with good works – ritual or moral – and the balancing of the accounts or weights.

See Sura 7:8-9, "*The weighing on that day will be justice/truth and those whose scales are heavy will be the happy ones. As for those whose scales are light, they will be the ones who lose their own soul because they mistreated our signs."*

So our destiny has become a matter of commercial transactions. It is as if we have to bargain with God as you might have to bargain in an Arabian market. The sinner cannot tell until the great day of reckoning whether his transactions with God have been successful.

The prophet Isaiah had a more realistic appraisal of the worth of our actions. ***"All our righteous acts are like filthy rags, for He has seen the truth of our estate; we all shrivel up like a leaf and like the wind our sins sweep us away. No one calls on Your name or strives to lay hold of You; for You have hidden Your face from us and made us waste away because of our sins."*** (Is. 64:6-7) So we cry to God, ***"Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips …"*** (Is. 6:5)

This type of mentality leads to some odd situations. For example, there is a story of Ibn Abu-Layla who was travelling along the road when a porter was pulling along a cart of pomegranates. A Syrian passer-by took one and hid it in his sleeve. Abu-Layla couldn't believe his eyes! He asked the man what he meant by stealing the pomegranate. The Syrian replied that his theft was indeed a bad deed, but the good act of giving would get the reward of ten and he gave the pomegranate to a beggar and was pleased with himself.

Another authority, Hisham, assures us that one fornication is not as bad as 10,000 lies. This stress on the letter of the law led a Bedouin thief who was in the habit of drawing items out of other people's tents at night with a long camel stick with a crook on the end, to explain to his tribal chief, "It was not I who stole anything at all. It was the stick!"

So a Muslim hopes to enter Paradise by his good works. We really don't need advice of this sort. It is common in "religious" advice. In the Hindu doctrine of karma, the merit that is gained by good works in this life will result in rebirth to a better life in the next life when you are reborn on earth. The Pharisaic doctrine of deeds of the law is very similar. So many religions have a similar philosophy of checks and balances.

I have mentioned the link between fasting and atonement. There is also a link between Hajj (the pilgrimage to Mecca) and atonement, *"Whoever completes the pilgrimage removes guilt."* (Sura 2:158)

You have already seen the connection between almsgiving and atonement for sin. Even the simple confession, *"There is no God but God and Muhammad is the Prophet of God"* is brought in as meriting pardon.

According to the Hadith, Muhammad was asked, "How is a Muslim saved?" He answered by repeating, *"There is no God but God and Muhammad is the Prophet of God."*

It appears that the objective of these announcements is to encourage Muslims to practice the Five Pillars of Islam – no doubt a good motive for such extravagant promises. But can a person be saved by performing this or that duty if there is no repentance – no change of heart? What is the point of any religion if it does not change a person from his old ways to much better ways? What is the good of it if he still has no idea of the greatness of God's holiness and righteousness?

Besides these logical and ethical difficulties, we have the problem of the arbitrary decrees of God. *"God forgives whom he will and torments who he will."* (Sura 3:129) So our Muslim friends lack any assurance of salvation. Muhammad was once asked, "Is this text meant for a special group of people or for people generally?" He answered, "For men generally". But one of Islam's greatest theologians (Starsi) commenting on this statement said, "Our friends protest about this text because it assumes Allah can open Paradise by virtue of his sovereignty to unbelievers and the like and can send to hell (the fires) the faithful and the pious." Starsi agreed that this is the implication of the statement and accepted that it was logical.

So Muslim logic presupposes such a possibility, even if such reasoning leads to doubt and a degree of scepticism on the one hand and fanaticism on the other.

For us, believers in the Lord Jesus, the principle is that God has forgiven us because the Lord Jesus has atoned for our sin. By the death of the Lord Jesus on the Cross, God has provided everything we need for salvation. It is interesting to discover in the Quran a statement that draws attention to the dilemma, *"No soul can bear the burden of another."* (Sura 35:18)

But history is full of examples of men and women who have borne the burdens of others and even gone to the length of dying for others. The Quran states, *"We have lifted your burden from you"* (this is Allah speaking). Sura 94:2-3 assures us that God will bear our burdens. Indeed no one can bear the burden of our sins nor can we bear the sins of others. There is no one except the Lamb of God who came to take away the sin of the world.

Developing a potential dialogue with Muslims over the Easter Period

1. Learn as much as you can about Islam, both Classical Islam – i.e. theological Islam that you can learn from books and from discussion with religious scholars – and Folk Islam that you learn from your ordinary friends. Get to know something of the form and content of the Quran. Why do Muslims fast and pray? Even a simple question like, "Why do you pray?" may open the door to a useful conversation.
2. Listen carefully to what your Muslim friend has to say. Never seek controversy for its own sake, but don't run away from it. Effective dialogue can be very time-consuming since your friends may want to read long sections of the Quran to you. Listen patiently and ask the Holy Spirit to give you insights into what is in their heart and mind. If you refuse to listen to them, why should they pay attention to you?
3. Whatever we may say about Muslims among ourselves as believers in the Lord Jesus, we have no mandate to attack the Quran or Muhammad. You could afford Muhammad some courtesy like 'Sayyid Muhammad'. You may not want to go that far, but be as courteous as you can. It is possible to show the moral superiority of the Lord Jesus from the Quran and from the early Muslim biographers after you know your friend really well and in a one-to-one situation. Never do this in a crowd!
4. The aim of dialogue is to gain the confidence of your Muslim friend and eventually to gain his/her friendship. The aim is not to win an argument. Usually an argument won leads to a friend lost! Treat your own Bible with the respect that your Muslim friend has for his Quran. Never place it on the ground. Don't write all sorts of notes in the margins. Don't mark it with underlining. If possible, it is best to keep it in a box and use it only in evangelism and discipling with the Muslims you are working with.
5. Don't try and cover too wide a field in one session of dialogue/conversation. Don't hurry from one point to another for this will only create confusion in his/her mind and yours! Any discussion should be brought to some sort of conclusion. Always ask what your friend would like to discuss next time and arrange the time and the place.
6. Men should witness to men and women to women. In some parts of the Muslim World it may be possible to break this guideline – i.e. with highly educated women in capital cities like Cairo, Kuala Lumpur or, Jakarta – but as a general rule, stick to same-sex discussions.

7. Avoid side issues – especially politics. This is hard to do in the Near East for there are so many political differences with "the Christian West" and with the Israelis as well as internally with the Shia and the Sunnis and other issues like I.S. You can try and address these issues, but the answers will lead you further and further away from discussing the particular implications of the death, resurrection and ascension of the Lord Jesus.
8. As soon as possible, as you are led by the Holy Spirit, offer your friend a copy of the New Testament in his/her own language as well as a "Jesus Film". This presupposes that you have met at least a couple of times and you have sensed that your new friend wants to find out what the 'Injil' has to say.
9. Don't put into his/her mind issues that might not have occurred to him/her. For example, some Muslims believe that the Bible has been corrupted. But your friend may not be aware of such an issue. The real problem is, **"Who is this Jesus for whom we claim so much? "**
10. Don't sound like a record on an old record player where the needle has got stuck– i.e. always repeating the same thing in the same way. Keep modifying your methods and altering your approach. Ask the Lord Jesus how to do this. He has promised us that when we witness before judges and rulers, He will help us, as well as in crises and emergencies when we are uncertain of what say. (Lk. 21:12-15)
11. Note the type of person you are talking to. This will be your guide to the right approach. Your friend may be very ignorant of Christianity and steeped in Folk Islam. He may be an intellectual or religious scholar with a keen understanding of the differences between Islam and Christianity. You might come across someone with a Sufi background who is sincere and prepared by the Holy Spirit. It is best to assume that the Holy Spirit has been preparing your friend in some way.
12. Sooner or later dialogue must become personal witness. This is our ultimate aim and it is the command of the Lord Jesus to us, ***"You shall be My witnesses."*** (Acts 1:7) An advocate argues his case and then calls upon witnesses. We are advocating the case that the Lord Jesus is the only Saviour from the consequences of our sin and we are also witnesses to the greatest experience in our lives.

Muslims agree with us on a great many truths including Divine Unity (there is only one God). We agree on Divine Omnipotence and that God is the Creator and Provider. We believe, with Muslims, in the resurrection of the dead and the heaven-sent mission of the Lord Jesus. But there is one crucial fact that our Muslim friends ignore – our guilt in the face of divine righteousness and holiness. We cry, ***"Woe is me! I am ruined for I am a man of unclean lips."*** (Is. 6:5) As gently as we can, we need to show our friend his/her sin. It is the Holy Spirit who must do this, but He almost always speaks through us His people.

Once our Muslim friend sees the enormity of his/her sin, he/she will soon realise that the sacrifice for sin had to be as universal and as eternal as God could make it – the giving of Himself in His Son.

Never enter into controversy without knowledge, without love, without necessity and perhaps most importantly, without prayer.