The Concept of God as Understood by Muslims

In Theological Circles

The theological concept of God in high Islam is mainly interpreted in terms of Greek philosophy. The Qur'anic concept of God is fairly close to the doctrine of God as found in the Old Testament. The concept of God in Popular Islam is different from both.

Theological Islam began in the Umayyad Caliphate when it soon came under the influence of Greek philosophy. It follows lines of argument where, in search of a philosophical explanation, it deviated in some respects from the teachings of the Qur'an. We will see that this theological concept of God is not in harmony with the Islam of the ordinary people either, since it lacks anything that would stimulate feelings of emotion or worship.

The theology of Islam in relating to God can be summarised as follows:

- God is the first cause and absolutely without condition.
- He is absolutely self-sufficient and is unaffected and 'unaffectable' by anyone or anything.
- In His being He is incapable of being altered by an agent or influence or any external cause.
- He is absolutely transcendent above all events in time and space.
- In His being He is exalted above and distinct from the universe.
- His essential attributes are seven in number. Four are self-evident and easily understood by reason: life – knowledge – will and power. The other three cannot be inferred from reasoning, but are revealed by revelation through the prophets. They are: hearing – seeing – speaking. These are the seven essential attributes. The other attributes – such as the ninety nine names of God – are latent in these and must be interpreted in the light of the above.

To a Muslim, such a doctrinal concept of God is very satisfactory. In his opinion it avoids the errors of Christians who destroy the pure monotheism by attributing plurality to the Godhead. It also safeguards him against another Christian error of imputing feelings to God – especially the ability to suffer, the susceptibility of sensation and emotion and the liability to suffer change – i.e. receiving impressions from any external agents. To a Muslim all this ascribes to God His subordination to conditions and all manner of weakness, insufficiency and incompleteness.

In Islam, God stands in utter contrast to the Christian understanding of Him. God is absolute, unfeeling in His being, unaffected by conditions, not responsible to man, irresistible in will and power, unbegotten and unbegetting, the all sufficient one who needs neither the world nor the men He has created.

It is a rejection of a God of love. Love implies feelings. This, in turn, implies He is conditioned by an external cause and is susceptible of emotion. A God of love would reduce God to weakness, incompleteness and insufficiency. It is even worse to call Jesus the only begotten Son of God. This is to attribute to God changeableness – i.e. He can be altered in His nature. He who was God in time became a father. To a Muslim, Christians have a concept of a God who is no longer absolute, no longer sovereign and no longer self-sufficient.

In the Qur'an

In theological Islam great stress is laid on the absolute transcendence of God and on His absolute sovereignty to the exclusion of any moral quality. All attributes are reduced to will and power. Is this taught in the Qur'an? No! God's love, mercy, holiness and anger are expressly mentioned in the Qur'an as His attributes.

Theologians admit that this raises serious questions, if not problems. They say that these Qur'anic verses have to be understood in the light of the unmitigated transcendence of God and are merely anthropomorphic expressions of His will and power. They say God has no

connection with the people He has created and no relationship with His creation. But this makes it very difficult to have a positive concept of God as the subject of our worship. This is contrary to the teaching of the Qur'an. In the Qur'an, God reacts to our (i.e. man's) actions and to our words. He is angry with us or pleased with us. In the Qur'an, God is to a certain extent conditioned and he has a relationship with people. It is clear that in the Qur'an God does have feelings!

In Popular Muslim Belief

From the cradle to the grave in every stage of development in a person's life, the name of God is used in a Muslim home. At birth the Qur'an is recited in the ears of every baby. As a child beginning to form syllables he/she isn't taught 'Mum' or 'Dad' but 'Allah'. Cradle songs and lullabies are praises to Allah. The first sentence a child learns is the Bismullah. He is taught the Shahadah and the Al Fatiha very early on. A pious Muslim desires no better end to his life than to die with the name of 'Allah' on his lips (There is no God but Allah). Many communications, letters, notices, in public or in private have the number 786 – the numerical value of the formula found at the beginning of every chapter of the Qur'an except Sura 9 – In the name of Allah the compassionate and merciful.

In anticipation of something or when making a promise it is made conditional by saying, "If God wills". On receiving sad news like the death of a relative words are said, "We are from Allah and to Allah we return." When someone sneezes he says "Allah be praised". If you hear him say this, you respond, "May Allah have mercy upon you". If something great happens, he exclaims, "God be praised". For every care and anxiety he finds comfort in saying, "As Allah wills". For every good thing or every hardship he says. "Allah be thanked". For every remembrance of sin he will repeat and keep repeating, "I repent O Allah" In every difficulty he reminds himself, "Allah will suffice". In every emergency he says, "I trust in Allah." In temptation he prays, "There is no strength to turn (from evil) but that of Allah."

These examples show that Muslims clearly believe God is a feeling 'Being' who will respond to the piety of His people, who is constantly aware of where they are and may be there to help.

Problems involved with concepts of God for Muslims

The attributes ascribed to God – particularly the seven essential attributes – can't exist in any 'being' in isolation. For example, **knowledge** is an intellectual acquaintance with an object other than self. **Will** is defined as the movement or attitude of the mind that is directed with conscious intention to an action, physical or mental and so requires some object to be willed. **Power i**s a quality that means the ability to do something or to act upon an object. It needs some material to be seen to exist. Similarly, seeing has no meaning without something to be seen and hearing implies something heard.

So in every case of the Divine Attributes being in operation it is a case of self interacting with something other than self. So it is illogical to think of God in eternity with the seven attributes being in utter solitude without being conditioned by some object/s externally existing apart from 'self'. This raises the question: What was there for God before creation so He could put His attributes into action? Our Muslim friends answer that these divine attributes existed only potentially in God before creation. But this doesn't solve the problem of illogicality because it makes God dependent on the thought of a possible universe instead of an actual one. Such an answer makes God dependent and conditioned which is contrary to our belief in the transcendental nature of God.

There is another problem with this answer. God wasn't a creator until the very act of creation when He became the Creator. This would mean the beginning of something new for the Divine Being. He moved from being a potential Creator to being an actual Creator. This contradicts the eternal unchangeableness of God. Our friends have no answers to these metaphysical problems. But we do have answers that satisfy both the mind and the emotions! The answer is in the Triune Nature of God.

God as revealed in Jesus

In Jesus we find the answer to these metaphysical problems. John 14:9 says, ***"He who has seen Me has seen the Father."*** He who is the transcendent, absolute Being reveals Himself in the person of the Lord Jesus. John 1:18 says, ***"No-one has ever seen God. The Only One who is at the Father's side, He has made Him known."*** When we look in the Bible for the highest concept of God we find it in such expressions as, ***"God so loved the world"***. (Jn. 3:16) We find the highest revelation of God when we are kneeling at the foot of Cross and looking into the dying face of Jesus. We see that indeed, ***"God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself"***. (2 Cor. 5:19)

Islam wants to reduce all the attributes of God to Will and Power – a deification of 'Force'. But God, as revealed in Jesus, is defined in terms of Love and Holiness. The Bible says, ***"God is Love"*** and makes His will a demonstration of love. Power is simply the servant of love. When we are asked what God is like, we remember that Jesus taught us to pray ***"Our Father in Heaven"***. Jesus taught us that God is like a woman who has ten silver coins. When she loses one she lights a candle, sweeps the house and searches until she finds it. What is God like? He is like a shepherd with 100 sheep. When he loses one he leaves the 99 with other shepherds and goes to search for the one that is lost. He is like a father who sees his lost son returning. While he is still far off he has compassion on him. He absorbs his shame and runs to welcome him home. (Lk. 15:1-32)

The search for what God is like doesn't lead to a blank – a hopeless negation of all we know, because the initiative in our search for God doesn't start from us, but from God. It is the shepherd who goes after the lost sheep and it is the father who comes out to welcome his prodigal son. We know that because <u>we have been found</u>!

Our Muslim friends object strongly to this because it makes God capable of suffering and capable of emotions – grief, sorrow, sadness, joy etc. They find this repugnant. But the Bible clearly teaches that in the being of God there is the possibility of suffering on the behalf of others. Far from spoiling His matchless 'blessedness' (I can't find another word), it is one of the aspects of His absolute perfection – He who is love.

Deism and the stark monotheism of 'high' Islam seem very arid. Love is the essence of the Being of God and we don't know any activity more 'active' than love. Love's eternal rest is eternal activity. As an eternal God, He is eternally active. Such activity in God can only be conceived of on the basis of the Trinity – plurality in unity!

All our Muslim friends who think carefully believe in a God of transcendence. But they are faced with the dilemma of the Qur'an and popular and practical religion that understands God as having feelings and emotion. This is an insurmountable problem for them. The fact remains that God, by creating the universe, subjected Himself to reaction, limitation, feelings and emotion. He also subjected Himself to what humanly appears to change and to apparent weakness in dealing with evil. In Islamic teaching on the bare unity of God there is no answer. But with a Triune God feelings and emotion existed in Him eternally. They don't belittle or disparage or dim His glory. Rather they enhance it! Feelings and emotion existed from eternity as part of His Being. In them He expressed Himself. In Creation He was and is expressing His nature in time and space – what He has been eternally. The Trinity shows that Creation didn't mean for God the beginning of a new relation with an external object. God as Triune is eternally and internally related in the highest possible way. In the Godhead there are three 'Inter-personalities' who are absolutely inseparable from each other and who share an inter-consciousness rather than a self-consciousness. So we have a relational God. This is a fundamental difference between the concept of God in Islam and the Bible's concept of God.

Strength in physical and moral terms

Another fundamental difference between our Muslim friends and ourselves is that Muslims tend to think in concrete terms – in physical terms. Our understanding of God is described in moral and spiritual terms. The question of physical power can be settled by measuring muscular force or the 'thrust' of aircraft engines. Moral issues can't be settled by such means.

In many cases what is strength in the physical realm may be weakness in the moral realm. Our friends often regard meekness as weakness. 'Turning the other cheek' appears downright stupid in an honour society. For us Jesus displayed huge moral strength when He allowed Himself to be arrested like a common criminal in the Garden of Gethsemane. This was followed by humiliation as He was despised and rejected by men and then finally killed by crucifixion.

To our Muslim friends this is a demonstration of weakness and dishonour, but for us it is a supreme demonstration of power – moral power. The difference between us and our friends is our understanding of the Cross***. "We preach Christ crucified a stumbling block to the Jews and folly to the Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God"***. (1 Cor. 1:23-24) Our friends see the Cross as blasphemy because it is a symbol of weakness and defeat, but for us it is the supreme symbol of moral strength and victory. It symbolises the power of God. A dictator uses physical force to impose His will on His subjects. But God who is the Supreme Ruler of the universe is also a Father! Like an ideal father on earth. He doesn't impose His will on His children by threats or the use of force. He waits and waits and uses moral strength to bring about the return of the prodigal.

We not only proclaim a personal God and a spiritual Being, we also declare that He is holy. God loves and He is holy. But in God these are not two attributes. They are two aspects of the same attribute. These are two terms used to describe the dual attitude of God towards man. Love will not leave the sinner until all has been done to reclaim him from his sin. Holiness, for the sake of the sinner himself and for the sake of all that makes life worth living for eternity, will not receive the sinner until he has been redeemed from the sinful state of his life. These two aspects are interdependent. There is no holiness without love and no true love without holiness. Holiness says **what must be done** to make a sinner fit for heaven and love says **what will be done** to achieve such a goal.

How does man's sin affect God?

This is a very important question. The answer to this question exposes a very major difference between us and our friends. To put it more simply, what does God experience at the sight of my sin? The answer of Muslim theologians is, "Nothing"! They can't attribute the emotions of anger or pity to God. In this context Al-Ghazali said, *"These to bless I care not and these to the fire I care not."* The Qur'an does speak of God's terrible wrath for sinners as well as His mercy and willingness to forgive. But to our Muslim friends both His mercy and His anger are part of the arbitrary nature of His will. Statements of mercy or vengeance in the Qur'an are qualified by 'whomever He wills'. The transcendent will of Allah cannot be qualified by any moral attribute. That would mean restricting the absolute sovereignty of the Supreme Being.

In popular Islam, God's wrath is often described as the wrath of an incensed absolute monarch or dictator. Picture an angry Sadaam Hussein. Perhaps more commonly in their experience it is likened to the irritation of a thwarted local government administrator. Ask your friends how they see the wrath of God?

Our answer to the question, 'How is God affected by man's sin?' goes something like this:

It is similar to the reaction of a rightly indignant father on earth when, by some act of his son, dishonour has been brought on his name. In other words, the son has acted in treachery or rebellion bringing dishonour on his father and his family. Because of our sin God is affected by anger, by pity, by sorrow and by love. His anger is the fire of love – the holiness that makes us sinners cry out to the mountains and rocks, ***"Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who is seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb"***. (Rev. 6:16) But at the same time God is also affected by pity, sorrow and love.

- God's pity is the recognition of man's weakness and his wretchedness because of his sin and because he is being manipulated by the Prince of Darkness.
- God's sorrow is caused by our treachery against His love.
- Love is the passionate desire in the heart of God to reclaim us sinners who are lost.

Jesus taught us that God is affected by man's sin and rebellion. Just as a good shepherd is affected by a single sheep that has gone astray or just like the lost coin that caused the woman to sweep her whole house and keep on seeking until it was found or like the father affected by the sight of his lost son returning home, so God is affected by man's sin.

It is at the Cross that we see the supreme demonstration of God's attitude to us sinners. It is at the Cross that we see God's action to reclaim us sinners. It is a demonstration of God's sorrow, God's pity, God's wrath and God's love for us. The suffering of Jesus on the Cross is temporal – happening in space and time. But it represents God's suffering. Jesus gathered up into his own being all the suffering that had come from sin right back to the Garden of Eden. He didn't do this by mechanical effort but by the necessity of His very nature. How can we possibly understand what this means? God came to us in human form. He really suffered on a Cross and so visibly demonstrated the truth of His love. He wanted us to see and understand it and put our trust in Him and in His great love for us. The only way that reconciliation between God and man is possible is through the historic and physical death of Jesus. In coming to understand the Cross, we come to understand God – the Only God. In the broken body of Jesus we begin to understand God's commitment to redemption until it will finally be complete.

So our history and our theology don't show us a reigning God sitting on His throne – calm, serene, passionless (i.e. with no feelings) ruling the world with the wave of a hand and an indifferent exercise of his power. This picture is partly true, but to leave out the Cross – the demonstration of the love and suffering of God – totally distorts the revelation of God to us. We see the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Overcomer, but we also see Jesus as the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.

So my search for God began with His search for me. Hasn't He led each one of us gently and with great patience and grace to the foot of the Cross? There at the Cross His holiness met the sinful state of my life. It was there I saw that if He forgave me with my sin and shame still on me and my rebellious heart unchanged, then His holiness would be destroyed (which isn't possible) and my soul would be lost. But my sin was removed. I was justified. The blood of Jesus cleansed me from all sin. As a child I was reconciled to My Father. I was restored and forgiven and I received new life!

What a truly amazing God we have!