SIN AS ALIENATION IN CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM

Islam and Christianity are often said to hold basically divergent views on the nature of sin. Muslims do not look on sin as an offence against God, since in their eyes this would seem to lessen His inaccessibility. In Islamic belief God is above man's failings. Sin cannot reach Him.

Even in Christian thought sin as a personal offence against God cannot imply a strict order of justice between God and man on the same level or in God any openness to change. The sinner acts against God, but he cannot do anything to Him. This is always to be understood when sin is said to "irritate" or "grieve" God. It would also seem to be the reason why "offend" and "offence" in the proper sense of the words rarely have God as their object in Scripture. The sinner's act cannot lessen the Creator or effect any modification in Him. Both the Book of Job and the Qur'an make it clear that the divine transcendence defies man's malice, even though the creature's attitude is in itself a sovereign outrage.

Jb 35. 6. If you sin, what injury do you do to God? Even if your offences are many, how do you hurt him?

Qur'an 47. 32/34. Indeed those who disbelieve and who avert (others) from God's path and who oppose the Apostle (Muhammad) will inflict no injury on God and He will frustrate their deeds.

Sin even when seen as an offence leaves God's dignity intact. Nevertheless the sinner by putting the Creator after some created good deprives Him of the honor and reverence due to Him. In the Christian view the sinner also breaks the convenant bond of

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2 Ibid., p. 16, where only five examples are given Nm 27. 14; 2 Kgs 17. 9; Prv 8. 36; Jdt 5. 25; and Jdt 11. 8-9.

3 Rudi Paret, Der Koran: Kommentar und Konkordanz (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1971), p. 87 on 3. 176, gives a number of parallels to this passage: 3. 144/138; 3. 176/170; 9. 39; and 11. 57/60.
love that links God’s cause with that of every human being. God is offended when man disregards His summons to love.

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Islam conceives the cardinal sin as the kind of pride that makes man forget his status as a creature. This is really to ascribe to himself a share in God’s prerogatives and thus to violate God’s unity by making a creature rival the Creator, a sin designated by the Qur’anic term *shirk* (31. 13/12). This word in its radical meaning is an “associating” or an “attributing of partners”. In its theological sense it is the attributing of associates to God and implies that these are put on a level with Him and even preferred to Him.

It is usually taken for granted that the beings associated with God are other deities, and so *shirk* is often translated simply as “polytheism” or “idolatry”. In the Qur’ân the word always connotes some kind of denial of God’s uniqueness and is said there to be the one unforgivable sin (4, 48/51 and 116). One explicit example in which the objects “associated” with God are false gods would be 6. 19:

Do you profess that there are other gods along with God? Say: I do not profess this. Say: He is only One God and I am innocent of (associating with Him) what you associate with Him.

Other passages like 6. 106, 10. 34/35, and 52. 43 clearly express the same thought even though they are less explicit. On occasion (e.g. in 6. 100 and 37. 158) those made sharers in the Godhead are said to be *jinn*, beings midway between men and angels.

But even in the Qur’ân, as distinguished from the writings of Muslim theologians and moralists, these associates are at times regarded as visible and material realities — persons of things, as one commentator on the Qur’ân remarks, that turn men away from God. These realities are clearly indicated as persons in 2. 165/160. There some people are said to “choose rivals who exclude God and whom (personal) they love as God is loved”. The Muslim commentators regard these “rivals” either as false gods or as certain human chiefs to whom the Arabs yielded the kind of devotion and obedience that men owe to God alone. In either case there is a question of persons other than God who are in some way preferred to Him.

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4 The Qur’ân is cited according to the numbering of the official Egyptian edition, Flügel’s, where it differs, being put after the diagonal.
This reference to persons preferred to God is even clearer in certain other passages. One of these is 3. 79/73:

It is not (fitting) for a human being that God should give him... the prophetic office and that he should then say to people: Be worshippers of me instead of God.

In another place (9. 31) Jews and Christians are rebuked for divinizing human authority by preferring their religious scholars and learned men to God — a practice which is called “giving associates to God” (“glory to Him above that which they associate with Him”) 7. Provided that monotheism be observed by setting no person or thing at rivalry with God, Muhammad even seemed willing at one stage of his career to demand nothing more of the Jews at Medina. This would be the meaning of 3. 64/57, where he exhorts his hearers to an agreement to “worship only God, to associate nothing with Him, and not to take one another as lords to the exclusion of God” 8.

The kinds of things that the “associators” are inclined to prefer to God are further specified in several other passages. In one early Medinan text (2. 96/90) the Jews are said to be “the most eager of men for life — life a thousand years long — even more eager than the associators (of created good with God”). The comparison indicates that the associators also inordinately desire long life. It would seem to imply too that this inordinate desire is what leads them to bring a created good into rivalry with God. The created good here, if the comparison has any point, would be long life itself. The value set on life, then, would make them willing to disregard God’s wishes in order to get it. This Adam and his wife did (7. 20-22/19-21) and were given only the passing enjoyment of the present life 9.

In another passage (2. 105/99) it is suggested that those who attribute associates to God have a disordered attachment to the kind of superior knowledge that Muhammad attained by special revelation 10 or, as Taba'i interprets the passage, by the Qur'ān. “Those who attribute associates (to God) do not like “any good to be sent down to you (Muhammad) from your Lord”. The envy 11 they betray in this passage indicates their dissatisfaction with

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9 2. 36/34 and Paret, *Kommentar*, p. 17, *ad loc*.
God's dispositions regarding themselves and Muhammad's superior knowledge which is the object of their envy.

Sometimes the rivals that men set up in competition with God are of a more general kind — creature comforts in a broad sense. One passage that would indicate this is 39. 8/11:

When hardship touches man, he prays to his Lord, turning repentantly to Him. Then when God changes hardship to favor from Himself, he forgets his former prayers to Him and sets up rivals to God... Say to him: Enjoy life in your ingratitude for a while. You are to be one of the inhabitants of Hell.

When man is deprived of the good things of life — the above text seems to say — like possessions, health or friends, he turns to God. But when fortune smiles on him again, he turns back to creatures and makes the good things of life rivals to God. "Enjoy for a little while your creature comforts which you have substituted for God", he is told, "because you will have to suffer in Hell hereafter".

In commenting on a similar passage, 16. 53-55/55-57, the Muslim commentators identify the "hardship" (ad-durr) as poverty and sickness. When God alleviates these burdens, some people show their ingratitude by putting other objects on a par with Him (verses 54-55/56-57). The text does not specify what these other objects are but it would imply that they are created goods like riches and bodily health. This would seem to follow from the fact that the associators' "ingratitude for what We have given them" (v. 55/57) is said to be a result of their attributing associates to God:

16. 54-55/56-57. A faction among you so associates (others) with God that they show ingratitude for what We have given them.

The objects associated, therefore, would be God's gifts that bring happiness in the present life. A passage (14. 30-31/35-36) whose thought parallels this would moreover identify the objects that are made to rival God as the good things of this life by contrasting them with the privation brought about by almsgiving:

14. 30/35. They (the ungrateful disbelievers — v. 28/33. set up rivals to God... 14. 31/36. Tell My believing servants to perform the ritual prayer of worship

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11 Watt, Muhammad at Medina, p. 207 and n.
12 Taṣīrū ʼl-Jalālayn, ad loc.
13 Zamakhshari, Al-Kashshāf, explains the "result" implied in this kind of passage in his comment on 14. 30/35: "They set up rivals to God so that they lead (others) astray".
14 The same idea is developed in 30. 33-34/32-33.
Say (to them): Enjoy the comforts of life (for the present) and to give alms from what We provided them with for your destination is Hell...before the coming of the Day (of Judgment)...

One of the most effective parables of the Qur'ān, 18. 32-43/31-41, teaches that putting one's trust in created objects like lands, wealth, and many children is an act of disbelief, since it puts creatures on a par with God and so denies His sovereignty. Such reliance on creatures is in reality an act of association (shirk) in the true sense of the word. The conclusion shows the man who relied on creatures rather than on God regretting his “associating anyone (children or wealth) with his Lord”.

32/31. Propound to them a parable: two men, to one of whom We gave two gardens... Each of the two gardens produced fruit...

(34/32)... So he said to his friend...: “I have greater wealth and a more powerful clan than you”.

35/33. He entered his garden, sinfully saying: “I do not think that this will ever perish (36/34) nor do I think that the Hour (of Judgment) is coming...”.

37/35. His friend said: “Have you disbelieved in Him who created you?... (38/36) But He is God... I will not associate anyone with my Lord. (39/37) When you entered your garden, why did you not say: As God wills! There is no strength but in God? Even though you regard me as inferior to you in wealth and children, (40/38) it may be that my Lord will give me something better than your garden...”.

42/40. His fruit was destroyed and he began to wring his hands... saying: Would that I had not associated anyone with my Lord”.

43/41. Apart from God there was no party to succor him, and he was helpless.

In verses 38/36 and 42/40 in the above passage it is implied that a believer must not associate anyone (personal) with God. Apparently the personal pronoun refers primarily to the stronger party or clan (interpreted as “children” by the believer in verse 39/37) and secondarily to possessions, the personal here including the impersonal. The Muslim commentators Zamakhsharī and Bayḍāwī, in interpreting 18. 42/40, regard the destruction of the garden as a consequence of the disbeliever's sin of putting creatures on a par with God — without explaining whether the creatures in question are other deities or sons and possessions. It seems clear, however, from the rebuke of the believer in verse 39/37, that the object which the sinner preferred to God is the garden itself:
(Instead of trusting in your garden) you should have said: There is no strength but in God; that is, you should have trusted in God alone and should not have taken a created good like a garden as something to be relied on in place of Him.

A shorter parable (18. 45-46/43-44) follows almost immediately upon this and teaches the same lesson:

"Wealth and sons are the adornment of the present life, but the things which last, good works, are, in your Lord's sight, better as regards reward and better as regards expectation".

A single verse (2. 266/268) of a later date sums up the moral of these twin parables:

Would any of you like to have a garden of palm trees and vines with rivers flowing through it and with all kinds of fruits? Old age has come upon him and he has an offspring of weaklings. Then a strong fiery wind strikes it and it is burned up.

God strips the associator of the creatures he is tempted to rely on instead of God: of the strength of youth (by "old age"), of strong, reliable sons (by "weaklings"), and of his flourishing gardens (by "a fiery wind").

Several other passages bring out the same moral: those who prefer creatures like wealth, lands, and sons to God and who put all their trust in them are really disbelievers, on a par with "associators" or polytheists. All are in some way guilty of the capital sin of idolatry (shirk) rebuked so severely in the Qur'ān. A passage like 41. 6-7/5-6 in particular, "Woe to the associators, who do not give the alms tax and who disbelieve in the next life", associates covetousness with idolatry and disbelief. This recalls the censures of the rabbinical writers who regarded refusal to give alms as idolatry.

Another expression found only in a series of suras dating from the last year or two in Mecca and the first few years at Medina paraphrases in a positive way the prohibition of the Decalogue, "You shall have no other gods before me" (Ex 20. 3 and Dt 5. 7). It is a phrase that signifies the exclusion of any creature whatsoever as an object of worship, mukhlīṣūna lahu 'd-dīn, "making Him

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15 E. g., 34. 15-17/14-16; 34. 34-35/33-34; 41. 6-9/5-8; 68. 17-32; and 74.11-16.
17 In 2. 139/133; 4. 146/145; 7. 29/28; 10. 22/23; 29. 65; 31. 32/31; 39. 2; 39. 11/14; 39. 14/16; 40. 14; 40. 65/67; and 98. 5/4, as dated by Blachère, Coran, after Nöldeke-Schwally.
the exclusive object of religion” or “reserving worship for Him alone”. In all occurrences of this phrase there is mention in the same or in nearby verses of some created reality that is set up as a rival to God — usually false gods, but also devils, Ezra or Jesus and Mary (whom Jews and Christians respectively are accused of associating with God), the favor of the powerful in Medina that prompted the “hypocrites” to deal falsely with Muhammad or simply the creature comforts sought by those who make the enjoyment of life their highest good.

On several occasions too the Qur’ān threatens with punishment him who “turns away from remembrance of his Lord.” In one passage (18. 57/55) in particular the sinner’s turning away from the evidence of God in creation and from the observance of His law is punished by a darkening of the mind and by moral insensibility:

Who does greater wrong than he who has been reminded by the signs of his Lord and then turns away from them, forgetting what his hands have perpetrated? We have put veils on their hearts lest they understand it and a deafness in their ears.

The Qur’ān also exhorts the badly disposed to a change of heart before is is too late:

42. 47-48/46-47. Respond to your Lord before there comes a day on which... you will have no place of refuge... But if they turn away, (O Muhammad)... your only duty is the proclamation... Truly man is ungrateful.

He who fails to respond to God will incur total abandonment; his turning away is nothing but base ingratitude. In time of prosperity man has no time for God but leaves Him and attaches himself to creatures. But in adversity, stripped of the objects that distracted him, he turns back to God in prayer (41. 51 and 17. 83/85).

The Muslim ethicians, especially Ghazzālī, extended the “attributing of partners to God” (shirk) to any kind of wrong intention in a work that should be done purely for God’s sake. In this sense good works done to gain the esteem of men or some other selfish

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18 In 10. 18/19; 31. 30/29; 39. 3/4; 39. 8/11; 39. 15/17; 40. 12; 40. 66/68; and 98. 6/5.
19 7. 30/28.
20 Implicitly in 2. 135/129 and explicitly in 9. 30 and 5. 116.
21 4. 139/138.
22 29. 66.
23 72. 17. See also 20. 100 and 20. 124/123.
24 Kafūr here means “disbelieving” as well as “ungrateful” just as the common Qur’ānic term kufur signifies “godlessness” as well as “ingratitude”.
advantage are a kind of idolatry, because the doer puts such esteem or advantage on a par with God and even substitutes it for the desire of pleasing Him alone. Such an extension of meaning for idolatry is a reasonable development of some of the Qur'anic passages considered above.

Some critics think that the Qur'an overemphasizes idolatry and gives too little importance to other kinds of moral deviation. Such a cristicism overlooks the fact that even in Judaism and Christianity every sin has an aspect of idolatry about it. Wherever man turns from God he becomes the salve of created objects — pleasure (Ti 3. 3), drink (Ti 2. 3), money (Mt 6. 24), political power (Ap 13. 8), envy (Ti 3. 3), even vain religious rites (Gal 4. 8-9). St. Paul more than once simply equates "covetousness" or the desire to possess with idolatry (Col 3. 5 and Eph 5. 5). The man whose life is ruled by a desire to possess persons or things puts creatures in place of God, which is precisely what idolatry is. In later Judaism, when idol worship in the crude sense was no longer a temptation, the rabbis used the Old Testament censures of idolatry to avert people from other serious faults. So Rabbi Jannai (about 235 A.D.) warned:

The one who heeds his evil inclination is like an idolater. What is the Scriptural basis? "There shall be no strange god in you..." (Ps 81. 9); you must not make king over you the strange god (that is, your evil inclination) within you.\(^{25}\)

St. Paul also speaks of those "whose god is the belly" (Phil 3. 19) and "who serve their own belly" (Rom 16. 18). He means those who make their basic value or object of worship their bodily appetites or whatever satisfies their carnal nature.\(^{26}\) The pursuit of materialistic goals puts man under the rule of an alien power and completely separates him from God.

When St. Augustine seeks to analyze the nature of sin, he sees its root in the creature's turning away from God:

They turned from Him whose Being is absolute and turned to themselves whose being is relative\(^{27}\) — a sin that can have no better name than pride.

When the will, abandoning what is above it, turns itself to something lower, it becomes evil because the very turning itself and not the thing to which it turns is evil.\(^{28}\)


\(^{27}\) *Ab illo qui summe est aversi, ad seipsum conversi sunt.*

\(^{28}\) Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, XII, 6, translated by Gerald G. Walsh
Sin, then, is an estrangement from God, a failure to respond, an inner aloofness resulting from entanglement in worldly affairs. Positive crimes only show how far a man has already departed from God. St. Paul sees in men’s turning to vile satisfactions after turning away from God, not so much formal sins, as punishments into which God lets sinners fall because of their ingratitude and infidelity. “And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a base mind and to improper conduct.”

The Qur’ān seems at one with Christianity in viewing sin as an alienation or a turning from God, which constitutes its formal privative element. By the same act the sinner is seen in both faiths as turning to some created good. This latter so attracts him that he prefers the satisfaction found in it to the divine good.

Adam’s act as depicted in Genesis makes it clear that sin is a rebellion — which corresponds well with the Qur’anic idea of sin as insubordinate pride and opposition to God. In both Christianity and Islam man arrogates to himself the qualities of self-sufficiency; he is no longer willing to depend on God, the absolute origin of all created good; he turns from Him, arouses His anger, and is abandoned by Him to every sort of sinful passion. These elements and several others common to the very concept of sin would seem to be included in the Qur’anic texts discussed above; sin is a kind of idolatry; it involves a certain contempt for God and His wishes; it unjustly denies Him His rights; it rejects His mercy; it is an act combining in itself ingratitude and disbelief, so much so that the identical term kufr has come to indicate both vices in Islam.

Manila.

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29 Rom 1. 28.

30 St. Augustine equated the turning from God and the turning to a creature (which is the essence of sin) with pride. See material referred to by note 28 above.