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الإنسان، الخطية، والغفران

Humanity, Sin & Salvation In Islam and Christianity

Beginning with this issue we will be featuring several articles under the above title, written from the perspective of one who knows Muslim sources and interpretations from the inside. The Qur'anic quotations are taken from the Windows CD-ROM, Holy Quran, Pajoolesh Corporation, and the Hadith quotations from the Islamic Computing Centre CD-ROM, Islamica. Reference numbering sometimes changes from one version to another. The author has not reproduced texts in Arabic script except in cases where there is some emphasis in Arabic which may not be as evident in English. It may also seem to the non-Arab reader that there is unnecessary repetition in the quotations. Bear in mind that this is a common mode of stressing authenticity and importance in Arab communication.

Editor

General Introduction

In the past 20 years I have seen numerous sin & salvation diagrams on how to present to others what Jesus did. First was the Four Spiritual Laws tract translated into Arabic. Then came the Navigators Bridge Illustration, then Evangelism Explosion, etc. While most of these address a Christian Audience, they have been helpful even with Muslims. But is there anything available that specifically meets the needs of Muslims and asks the questions they ask? Muslims do not believe in original sin, or do they? A Muslim has no need for a Saviour, only good guidance and direction. He needs no transformation, only reformation. Why should an innocent person pay the price for the guilty one? Is there anything in the Qur'an, Hadith or Muslim cultures that helps us with these questions? Indeed there is. In a series of articles I will seek to explain both the formal Islamic view and the informal one. I will mix between the scholastic interpretation and the common understanding. In my experience the street analysis, the Qur'an and the Hadith all diverge from the formal or the official view. The first article will be of a technical nature but the rest will address the meaty issues. So don't give up before the end. I will use also folk stories & jokes which can help present the issue of sin and salvation to Muslims in easier and more culturally-sensitive ways.

The first article will deal with the purpose and nature of humanity in the Qur'an and the Hadith. I will not explain the Christian view unless necessary for understanding of the subject. I assume the reader has a good understanding of the Christian view. It is important to see and hear what Muslims themselves are

saying, not just what Christians are saying about Muslims. I will not interpret the Islamic materials to make them fit Christian doctrines. But I will challenge Muslims to examine those of their own materials and documents which are very similar to, if not the same as, what is written in the Bible. My goal is not debate, but to show that the official Islamic view does not jibe with Qur'an or Hadith.

Article One: The Islamic view of Humanity

Overview

All people are born as true Muslims, innocent, pure, and free as shown in Sura 30:30. There is no single act which has warped the human will. Any concept of original sin is very much contrary to the teachings of Islam. It is not sin for man to be imperfect and fallible. As a finite creature he is bound to be so. However, sin is committed when a man has the ways and means of perfection and decides not to avail himself of them. Man is not responsible for committing sin in childhood. He only becomes responsible after he grows up, is able to exercise his God-given intellect, and can thus distinguish between right and wrong. This is the only time when he can bear responsibility for his actions before his Creator. Having been born good, what he becomes after birth is largely the result of external influence and environment.

Since man is a good and responsible being, committing sinful acts is the responsibility of the actual offender only. According to orthodox Muslim interpretation, sin is not hereditary. Neither is it communal in nature, nor

is it transferable. God has given man freedom of will, and man is therefore personally responsible for his own actions, good or bad, right or wrong. A man can misuse his freedom and fall into corruption and all other vices, but at the same time he is capable of reform and receiving forgiveness if he sincerely chooses to submit to God's guidance. Sin is acquirable, but not innate. Therefore, if man rightly uses those special qualities with which he has been endowed, he can easily avoid sin. Sin is not inevitable, because man is not sinful

Fitrah

To understand the Islamic view of humanity we have to define the term and the doctrine of *Fitrah* (الفطرة) in Islam. Fitrah is defined as an inborn natural predisposition which exists at birth in all human beings and which can not change. It is inclined towards right action and submission to Allah. It can be described as the concept of original goodness, in contrast to the Christian concept of original sin. Fitrah is defined in both linguistic and religious terms.

Linguistically the word comes from the Arabic radicals, ف-ط-ر the verbal

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noun being فاطر. The root action means to cleave, split, slit, rend or crack. The first form فطر is also used in the sense of "to create," that is, to bring into existence for the first time. Thus the terminology فاطر السماوات the originator or creator of the heavens. So فطر (created) is equivalent to طبع printed, stamped, impressed. Faatir (علي شئ) is also synonymous to the verb ختم (sealed) and with خلق (created or formed). So Fitrah, linguistically, means an inborn natural disposition.

Religiously, Fitrah means to be born either prosperous or unprosperous [in relation to the soul]. It is associated with Islam and being born as a Muslim. Repeating the confession the *Shahada* (الشهادة) that there is no god but Allah, and that Muhammad is the messenger of Allah, which makes a person a Muslim, puts one in a state of Fitrah. In this sense Fitrah is the faculty of knowing Allah, which he has created in mankind. It is the natural constitution with which the child is created in his mother's womb and whereby he is capable of accepting the religion of truth. Fitrah is also related to true religion, الدين الصحيح. The prophet taught a man to repeat certain words when lying down to sleep, and said, "...then if you die that same night, you die upon the Fitrah (in the true din)." This is confirmed by Sura 30:30

So Man is distinguished from the rest of creation by having been endowed with intellect عقل and free will إرادة. The intellect enables him to discern right from wrong and the will enables him to choose between them. He can use these

faculties to complement his Fitrah and to please Allah or to be untrue to it and displease him. The choice is his. Mr. Yasin Mohamed, in his book *Fitra*,¹ states the following: "*The concept of Fitrah as original goodness, in my view, does not merely connote a passive receptivity to good and right action, but an active inclination and a natural innate predisposition to know Allah, to submit to him and to do right.*" P.21. Every individual is endowed with the innate knowledge of the unity of god, *Tawhid* (التوحيد). He is held accountable for his belief in Allah precisely because of his Fitrah. The volitional implication of Fitrah is that man is responsible for his own wrong actions. It is inconceivable to Muslim thinking that a person should be punished for wrong actions that others have done. Yasin goes on to state emphatically, "*Neither Islam, common sense or modern Western law hold a person responsible for the deeds of someone else.*" This is also based on many Qur'anic verses such as the following:

Say: 'Shall I seek another than Allah for Lord, when He is Lord of all things? Each soul earneth only on its own account, nor doth any laden bear another's load. Then unto your Lord is your return and He will tell you that wherein ye differed.' Sura 6:164

قل أغير الله ابني ربا وهو رب كل شئ ولا تكسب كل نفس إلا عليها ولا تزر وازرة وزر أخرى ثم إلى ربكم مرجعكم فينبئكم بما كنتم فيه تختلفون

Whosoever goeth right, it is only for (the good of) his own soul that he goeth right, and whosoever erreth, erreth only to its hurt. No laden soul can bear

another's load, We never punish until we have sent a messenger. Sura 17:15

من اهتدى فإنما يهتدي لنفسه ومن ضل فإنما يضل عليها ولا تزر وازرة وزر أخرى وما كنا معذبين حتى نبعث رسولا

Fitrah, then, is defined in official Islam as an innate predisposition for good and for submission to the one God. It is the concept of original goodness, in contrast to the Christian doctrine of original sin. But do the Qur'an and Hadith confirm this or not? Let us see what they both say.

Qur'an

Islam has a popular optimistic analysis of the human condition as seen in the following verses:

So set thy purpose (O Muhammad) for religion as a man by nature upright – the nature (framed) of Allah, in which He hath created man. There is no altering (the laws of) Allah's creation. That is the right religion, but most men know not. Sura 30:30

This perspective is mirrored by contemporary Muslims like Badru Katar-egga who say that the conclusion drawn from this by the late scholar Isma'il al-Faruqi is, "Islam denies, therefore, that God had to ransom humanity by means of oblation and sacrifice." Human nature does not need divine transformation to do that which is right. Only divine guidance. After Adam is driven from the Garden of Eden, he is promised guidance from God and freedom from fear if he follows it (cf. Sura 23:38/36-39)

Surely We created man of the best stature Sura 95:4

And further (thus): 'set thy face towards

religion with true piety, and never in any wise be of the Unbelievers; And, (O Muhammad) set thy purpose resolutely for religion, as a man by nature upright, and be not of those who ascribe partners (to Allah). Sura 10:105

Abraham was indeed a model, devoutly obedient to God, (and) true in Faith, and he joined not gods with God: Lo! Abraham was a nation obedient to Allah, by nature upright, and he was not of the idolaters. Sura 16:120

He who has made everything which He has created Most Good: He began the creation of man with (nothing more than) clay. And made his progeny from a quintessence of the nature of a fluid despised: But He fashioned him in due proportion, and breathed into him something of His spirit. And He gave you (the faculties of) hearing and sight and feeling (and understanding): Little thanks do ye give! Sura 32:7-9

Alongside this optimistic assessment of humans there is also a pessimistic one. It bewails how few in previous generations restrained others from corruption (11:116/118). Instead, most people are disbelievers (12:103, 106; 13:1). Humankind is sinful (14:34/37; 33:72) and rebellious (96:6). The conclusion is, *If God were to punish men for their wrongdoing, He would not leave a single creature on earth.* (Sura 16:61)

ولو يؤاخذ الله الناس بظلمهم ما ترك عليها من دابة ولكن يؤخرهم إلى أجل مسمى فإذا جاء أجلهم لا يستأخرون ساعة ولا يستقدمون

The fundamentalist theologian Ibn Hazm (994-1064) reflected this pessimism, believing that the human soul,

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when left to itself, spontaneously inclines to dishonesty.² Even the most celebrated Muslim theologian al Ghazali (1058-111), with his mystical Sufi awareness of inner sin, identified four base inclinations in humans, those of savage animals, those of the beast, those inspired by the devil, and those arising from pride and ambition.³

Shiite Muslims have normally been more aware of the "carnal soul" than their Sunni coreligionists. The late Ayatollah Khomeini said: "You should pay attention and all of us should pay attention (to the fact) that man's calamity is his carnal desire, and this exists in everybody, and it is rooted in the nature of man." (Quoted from *Islamic Government Does not Spend for its Own Grandeur*, Kayhan International, September 4, 1985, p.3)

Joseph is quoted as having said in Sura Yusuf 12:54: *And I do not hold my own self to be free from weakness; for, the soul is surely prone to enjoin evil, save that whereon my Lord has mercy. Surely, my Lord is Most Forgiving, Merciful.*

وما أبرئ نفسي إن النفس لأمارة بالسوء إلا ما رحم ربي إن ربي غفور رحيم

He does not place the blame on Satan or circumstances but points to a problem at the core of human nature!

In Sura 16:61 the universal effect of the problem is made plain: *And if Allah were to punish men for their wrongdoing, He would not leave thereon a living Creature, but he gives them respite till an appointed term...*

The following are other Qur'anic references to the sinfulness of mankind:

Allah doth wish to lighten your (difficulties): For man was created weak (in flesh). Sura 4:28

Verily, man is given up to injustice and ingratitude. Sura 14:34

واتاكم من كل ما سألتموه وإن تعدوا نعمة الله لا تحصوها
إن الإنسان لظلوم كفار

Most ungrateful is man! Sura 17:67

Yet when we bestow our favors on man, he turns away and becomes remote on his side (instead of coming to Us), and when evil seizes him he gives himself up to despair! Sura 17:83

Man is (ever) niggardly! Sura 17:100

That which is on earth we have made but as a glittering show for the earth, in order that We may test them – as to which of them are best in conduct. Sura 18:7

And verily We have displayed for mankind in this Qur'an all manner of similitudes, but man is more than anything contentious. Sura 18:54

ولقد صرفنا في هذا القرآن للناس من كل مثل وكان الإنسان أكثر شئ جدلاً

And He it is who gave you life, then He will cause you to die, and then will give you life (again). Lo! Man is verily an ingrate. Sura 22:66

وهو الذي أحياكم ثم يميتكم ثم يحييكم إن الإنسان لكفور
Lo! We offered the trust unto the heavens and the earth and the hills, but they shrank from bearing it and were afraid of it. And man assumed it. Lo! He hath proved a tyrant and a fool. Sura 33:72

انا عرضنا الأمانة على السماوات والأرض والجبال فأبين أن يحملنها واشفقن منها وحملها الإنسان انه كان ظلوما جهولا

It was We Who created man, and We know what dark suggestions his soul makes to him: for We are nearer to him than (his) jugular vein. Sura 50:16

Truly man was created very impatient: Fretful when evil touches him; And niggardly when good reaches him. Sura 70:19-21

Truly man is to his Lord ungrateful. And to that (fact) he bears witness (by his deeds). And violent is he in his love of wealth. Sura 100:6-8

Hadith

The Hadith also has a popular optimistic analysis of the human condition, as seen in the following:

Sahih Al Bukhari صحيح البخاري

The Prophet (peace-be-upon-him) said, "Every child is born on Fitrah (with a true faith i.e. to worship none but Allah Alone), but his parents convert him to Judaism or to Christianity or to Magianism, as an animal delivers a perfect baby animal. Do you find it mutilated?" Then AbuHurayrah recited the holy verses: "The pure Allah's Islamic nature (true faith of Islam) (i.e. worshipping none but Allah) with which He has created human beings. No change let there be in the religion of Allah (i.e. joining none in worship with Allah). That is the straight religion (Islam) but most of men know not." (AbuHurayrah 2:440, 441)

I heard the Prophet (peace-be-upon-him) saying, "Five practices are characteristic of the Fitrah: circumcision,

shaving the pubic hair, cutting the moustache short, clipping the nails, and depleting the hair of the armpits." (AbuHurayrah 7:779)

Allah's Apostle (peace-be-upon-him) said, "To shave the pubic hair, to clip the nails and to cut the moustache short, are characteristic of the Fitrah." (Abdullah ibn Omar 7:778)

Sahih Muslim صحيح مسلم

The Messenger of Allah (peace-be-upon-him) said, "Ten are the acts according to Fitrah: clipping the moustache, letting the beard grow, using the tooth-stick, snuffing up water in the nose, cutting the nails, washing the finger joints, plucking the hair under the armpits, shaving the pubes, and cleaning one's private parts with water." The narrator said, "I have forgotten the tenth, but it may have been rinsing the mouth." (Aisha 0502)

The Messenger of Allah (peace-be-upon-him) used to attack the enemy when it was dawn. He would listen to the Adhan; so if he heard an Adhan, he stopped, otherwise made an attack. Once on hearing a man say: Allah is the Greatest, Allah is the Greatest, the Messenger of Allah (peace-be-upon-him) remarked, "He is following al-Fitrah (al-Islam)." Then hearing him say, "I testify that there is no god but Allah, there is no god but Allah," the Messenger of Allah (peace-be-upon-him) said, "You have come out of Fire (of Hell)." They looked at him and found that he was a goat-herd. (Anas ibn Malik 0745)

Abu Daoud أبو داود

The Apostle of Allah (peace-be-upon-him) said, "Ten are the acts according

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to Fitrah (nature): clipping the moustache, letting the beard grow, using the tooth-stick, cutting the nails, washing the finger joints, plucking the hair under the arm-pits, shaving the pubes, and cleansing one's private parts (after easing or urinating) with water." The narrator said, "I have forgotten the tenth, but it may have been rinsing the mouth." (Aisha 0052)

الموطأ Al Mawtta

The Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, said, "Every child is born on the Fitrah and it is his parents who make him a Jew or a Christian. Just as a camel is born whole—do you perceive any defect?" They said, "Messenger of Allah, what happens to people who die when they are (very) young?" He said, "Allah knows best what they used to do (or would have done)". (AbuHurayrah 16.16.53)

The following show that the Hadith, as the Qur'an, presents a pessimistic assessment of humanity as well as the optimistic one we have just seen:

صحيح البخاري Sahih Al Bukhari

The Prophet (peace-be-upon-him) said, "On the Day of Resurrection Allah will say, 'O Adam!' Adam will reply, 'Labbayk, our Lord, and Sa'dayk.' Then there will be a loud call (saying), 'Allah orders you to take from among your offspring a mission for the (Hell) Fire.' Adam will say, 'O Lord! Who is the mission for the (Hell) Fire?' Allah will say, 'Out of each thousand, take out 999.'

At that time every pregnant female shall drop her load (have a miscarriage) and

a child will have grey hair. (When the Prophet, peace be upon him, mentioned this) the people were so distressed (and afraid) that their faces paled whereupon the Prophet (peace-be-upon-him) said, "From Gog and Magog nine hundred ninety nine (999) will be taken out and one from you.

"You Muslims (compared to the large number of other people) will be like a black hair on the side of a white ox, or a white hair on the side of a black ox, and I hope that you will be one-fourth of the people of Paradise."

On that, we said, "AllahuAkbar!" Then he said, "I hope that you will be) one-third of the people of Paradise." We again said, "AllahuAkbar!" Then he said, "(I hope that you will be) one-half of the people of the Paradise." So we said, "AllahuAkbar." (Abu Said Al Khudari 6:265)

I heard Allah's Messenger (peace-be-upon-him) saying, "If the son of Adam had enough money to fill a valley, then he would wish for another similar to it, for nothing can satisfy the eye of Adam's son except dust. And Allah forgives him who repents to Him."

Ibn Abbas said, "I do not know whether this saying was quoted from the Qur'an or not."

Ata said, "I heard ibn az-Zubayr saying this narration while he was in the pulpit." (Abdulallah Ibn Abbas 8:444, 445)

The Prophet (peace-be-upon-him) said, "The first man to be called on the Day of Resurrection will be Adam who will be shown his offspring, and it will be said

to them. 'This is your father, Adam.' Adam will say (responding to the call). 'Labbayk and Sa'dayk.' Then Allah will say (to Adam), 'Take from your offspring the people of Hell.' Adam will say, 'O Lord, how many should I take?' Allah will say, 'Take ninety-nine out of every hundred.'” (AbuHurayrah 8:536)

Conclusion

It is important to understand the full Islamic view of humanity. We tend to hear only one side. I have found it helpful to show from the Qur'an that man is sinful by nature even according to Islam.

In the Qur'an as well as the Hadith we find an awareness that human beings will become corrupt once they are created, if not born corrupt. About Adam we read: *And when thy Lord said to the angels: 'I am about to place a vicegerent in the earth,' they said, 'Will Thou place therein such as will cause disorder in it, and shed blood? - And We glorify Thee with Thy praise and extol Thy holiness.'* He answered, 'I know what you know not.' Sura 2:30

وَإِذْ قَالَ رَبُّكَ لِلْمَلَائِكَةِ إِنِّي جَاعِلٌ فِي الْأَرْضِ خَلِيفَةً قَالُوا أَتَجْعَلُ فِيهَا مَنْ يُفْسِدُ فِيهَا وَيَسْفِكُ الدِّمَاءَ وَنَحْنُ نُسَبِّحُ بِحَمْدِكَ وَنُقَدِّسُ لَكَ قَالَ إِنِّي أَعْلَمُ مَا لَا تَعْلَمُونَ

The following verses confirm this fear of the angels:

Iblis said, after disobeying Allah: *...I will most surely bring his (Adam's) descendants under my sway except a few.* (Sura 17:62) In another account of the same story Iblis is reported to have said: *Then will I surely come upon them (Adam's descendants)...and Thou wilt not find most of them to be grateful.*

(Sura 7:18). As the terrible history of humanity shows continually, these verses have proved true. In the light of all the horror they cause on a worldwide scale it is very difficult to explain how human beings can be basically good.

The observant reader will have picked up the similarities to the Christian understanding of man's natural state, as well as the intrinsic differences. The main points can be summarized thus:

1. Man is a creation of God
2. Man was created good, but is also weak, a sinner, poor in character – in the Qur'an by creation, in the Bible as a result of the fall.
3. The purpose of creation was for man to serve Allah (Sura 51:56); to toil and to struggle (Sura 90:4); a glittering show (Sura 18:7).
4. The character of man = man was created weak (Sura 4:28); with dark suggestions in his soul (Sura 50:16); impatient (Sura 70:19); fretful towards evil (Sura 70:20); niggardly (Sura 70:21; 17:100); ungrateful (Sura 100:68); given up to injustice and ingratitude (Sura 14:34); violent in love and wealth (Sura 100:8).
5. It is clearly stated in Islam that man is sinful.

I have found that people in the street do know and acknowledge this fact, even though the official view is quite to the contrary. I have also found that most Muslims are not sure if they are going to heaven because none of them have confidence in their own goodness.

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It is obvious that the Islamic view does not coincide 100% with either the Qur'anic and Hadith records, or with life on the street. It seems to me that the Christian view is more compatible with Islam and Arab culture than is the Islamic view. I will explore this further in a later article.

In the next article we will discuss original sin, Adam's relationship to the human race as far as sin is concerned, and the Islamic understanding of what sin is. We can not understand the solution to the sin problem with out understanding how sin is defined. You have to study the ailment before you prescribe the medication.

As they say in Arabic, "till we meet again." إلى اللقاء Abu Atallah

1. Yasin, Mohamed, *Fitra: The Islamic Concept of Human Nature*, TaHa Publishers Ltd., London, 1996
2. Arnaldez, R., "Ibn Hazm," *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd edition, S.V.
3. A.J. Wensinck, *La Pensee de Ghazali*, Paris, Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1940, pp. 47-49

CONVERTED POLYGAMISTS AND CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

The following article was contributed by one of our Seedbed readers. I can only recall one instance during my ministry in North Africa when we were faced with the potential of this type of crisis. And in that instance, the professed believer who had two wives died before we had to consider the matter of his integration into the emerging church. My impression is that this article may be more applicable to workers in sub-saharan Africa and perhaps other places in the Muslim world than it is to the Arab Muslim world. We invite your feedback as to whether you have grappled with this problem and, if so, how have you dealt with the issue? Ed.

Polygamy in Muslim lands

Mission work amongst Muslims has begun in God's providence to bear considerable fruit in the salvation of many. In societies, still in many respects culturally similar to that of the patriarchs, this can present unusual and complex problems. In the West, our society has generally undergone a dramatic and astonishing slide in moral standards. Our Middle Eastern neighbours look on with pity and disdain. In particular, they lament the break-up of marital and family life, and the easy shamelessness of divorce. Yet it is in Near Eastern and African societies that legal and stable polygamous relationships, while not prevalent, do occur, particularly in rural and agricultural communities. It is difficult for the Western mind to appreciate how such attitudes can coexist in the same community. But there the stricter Muslim authorities express little embarrassment at embracing both the shamefulness of divorce and a firm defense of polygyny's legitimacy.

What is at issue?

The problem the churches face is how to handle converts who are already engaged in a polygamous marriage. The problem is particularly acute when each of the wives expresses a preference to stay with her husband. Do we have scriptural grounds to require, and if necessary to compel, the divorce of these partners against their will? And if so which partners and how?

Guiding scriptural principles.

It is with Christ's own law that we examine the Scriptures, and it is Christ who Himself starts with Moses.¹ We dare not add to or remove from any of God's holy law.² There is grave danger even if we slightly compromise or defile His holy standards. There is equally serious danger if we fall into a state which the Apostle challenges, 'Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?'³ What a daunting task the conscientious interpreter has to face! How scrupulous we must be not

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to inject our presuppositions into the texts! God's explicit declarations are undoubtedly the clearest and best place to found our approach. Yet we should find no real conflict between God's express statements and His actions toward His people in Scripture narrative—indeed there may be a tension temporarily arising between the two as a result of His great patience, but ultimately His acting and His speaking will both reflect His perfect, holy and immutable character. If we do find apparent conflict it should stimulate a careful re-examination of our approach. Additionally to argue as some, that His essential moral requirements have changed progressively with the passage of history does great violence to His consistency and integrity.⁴

Is polygamy sinful?

Genesis 2:23-25 establishes that God's purpose at creation was a monogamous relationship between one husband and one wife. Christ's quotation of this creation ordinance significantly introduces the word 'two' from the Greek Septuagint translation of the Old Testament in both Matthew and Mark's accounts. God's plan and ordinance for marriage is monogamous. It was Lamech, a singularly violent and vengeful man, who apparently first introduced a deviation from God's order. 1Corinthians 7:2-4 sets out the New Testament requirements for believers most clearly. How can a woman share joint authority over her husband with another? How can the reciprocal submission here required of each partner ever be engaged in by a man with two

wives? There is an exclusive singularity of relationship intended here, in contrast to the fornication and faithlessness of Corinthian society. So we conclude from these and other texts that polygamy is a deviation from and breach of God's commandment. It is a transgression and is undoubtedly sinful.

Is polygamy equivalent to adultery?

This is the key to the problem in hand. Undoubtedly, polygamy falls into the same family of sins as lustful thoughts and other sexual sins, condemned in the Seventh and Tenth Commandments. It is a breach of God's original ordinance. However although lustful thoughts will earn us God's everlasting punishment if they are not forgiven they do not constitute a sin of sufficient gravity to justify a wife divorcing her husband. They may be in the same family as adultery, but they are not as heinous as the action itself. What about polygamy? Does God regard it as of equal gravity, requiring equal treatment to adultery? Here we must carefully re-examine our primary texts. The sacred relationship established and defined by God in Genesis 2:24 is most certainly defiled and injured by the taking of a plurality of wives. But does it thereby become completely invalidated? The issue is not whether the marriage is corrupted, but whether or not it is thereby destroyed in God's sight. This would undoubtedly be the case if, as has been claimed, God's ordinance of marriage necessarily requires 'the exclusion of all others' not only to comply with His will, but actually to define it as well. But wher

does the text explicitly require this sense? The union of flesh certainly indicates a profound and irreversible bond, but it does not explicitly indicate that its very validity is terminated by a plurality of partners. Likewise with Christ's clear commands about divorce, it is not explicitly clear that the violation of the 7th commandment involved in taking two or three partners is of the same degree of heinousness as putting away one wife to take another. That requires the excision of two clauses from His command, ('who-soever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication') and an injection of meaning into the verse which may or may not be justified. Polygamy falls short of the law but, unlike adultery, it does at least require a faithful maintenance of relationship and care for each partner, and considerate provision for their offspring, as with Abraham's affection for Hagar, or Jacob's to Leah.

One flesh

The use of the term 'become one flesh' itself may seem impressive evidence to hedge around not just the exclusive lawfulness, but also the exclusive validity of singular marital relationship, until we realise that the New Testament itself does not use the term only of marriage. In 1Corinthians 6:15-18, Paul uses the description of the first couple to describe the horrific and damaging effects of fornication. The argument is clear: The members of Christ are united with the members of a prostitute, two become one flesh, joined as one body. This is not a

contrast between the right and the wrong, but a direct attribution of the same irreversible effects entailed in marriage to a casual, thoughtless relationship. Is a casual sexual relationship then equivalent to a marriage? No, the intention is to instill a strong disincentive to sin by showing only that it has similar profound physical consequences. So to summarise, polygamy breaches God's law, but our primary texts themselves do not explicitly clarify that it is legally equivalent to adultery.

The law on adultery

It is to other passages of God's law we must turn to clarify His mind and will on this question. Firstly we must examine what the law required in the case of adultery. Leviticus 20:10 and 19:20 make it abundantly clear that there is only one punishment for adultery between free persons, immediate execution. No subsequent qualification was made to this law. This ongoing requirement provided the sharp barb of the trap set for the Lord Jesus by the Pharisees in John 8:2. No compromise was made with Israel over adultery.

The law on polygyny

Two texts clarify that God regards polygyny as of a quite different gravity to adultery.

Firstly, Exodus 21:8-11, in speaking of a maidservant, 'If she please not her master, who hath betrothed her to himself, then shall he let her be redeemed: ... If he take him another wife; her food, her raiment, and her

duty of marriage, shall he not diminish. And if he do not these three unto her, then shall she go out free without money.' It is clear a marriage had begun from the word 'another' before the term 'wife,' and also from the term 'duty of marriage' from which she is not to be deprived, which the modern translations render more plainly, 'marital rights' (NIV) or 'conjugal rights' (NASB). This explicitly excludes consecutive polygamy, and provides an incontrovertible instance of the toleration of polygyny by Almighty God in His law.

Secondly, Deuteronomy 21:15-17 assures the rights of the firstborn, in the case where there are sons by more than one wife, to the son actually born first, even though he may not be son of the favourite wife. Some suggest this refers only to two consecutive marriages, but there is little contextual support for this supposition. The most natural reading appears to be that it refers to polygamy of a simultaneous kind. It does not sanctify polygamy, but by its very presence it does indicate an altogether different attitude of God to polygyny than to adultery.

Deuteronomy 25:5-10 and Leviticus 18:18 contribute less certain weight to the argument, but also indicate that polygyny was explicitly tolerated. The prohibition to future kings against multiplying wives in Deuteronomy 17:16-17 is in itself no more rigorous proof that they were obliged to remain monogamous than that they must possess only one horse or one piece of silver or gold. The greater evils of the

excessive polygamy found in pagan kings, and no doubt the commendation of monogamy as well, was being highlighted to the one person in the kingdom most likely to have more than one spouse.

Polygamy was not merely provided for at Sinai, but explicitly tolerated. It is not commended, but borne with. The law recognises as valid that which it also indicates is not lawful. It does not annul polygamous marriages. Both Genesis and the New Testament indicate that this toleration, as for example was exercised in the grounds for divorce, was because of the 'hard-heartedness' of the people. However it is a toleration no longer open for Christian marriages, since Christ's restoration of the original ordinance. The question before us is however different. What of those who have entered into its obligations, who may have begotten children by their wives, and upon whom their wives are dependent, socially, emotionally and financially? In the maelstrom of Christian conversion from a Muslim background, with intense family and social hostilities, often culminating in banishment or murder, it would not be surprising if a Muslim wife chose to part from her 'infidel husband'. Here we could scarcely intervene with any propriety in the light of Paul's clear command in 1Corinthians 7.15. In other cases, family members may compel a legal divorce from an 'apostate' by a civil action. The real issue applies in the case where a wife or wives are unwilling to part from their

husband. Do we then have scriptural authority for compelling divorce?

The normative value of narrative passages of Scripture

If we interpret God's law so as to put His declarations at variance with His actions it should caution us about our interpretative approach. The narrative passages are certainly to be approached with greater caution than God's forthright declarations, but Christ so used the narrative of David's eating the shewbread to reprove even the Pharisees' direct challenge from the law to highlight their error.⁵ God's response to situations of sin or compromise has a normative value in itself, as Paul plainly reminds us in 1 Corinthians 10:6. So when we review the manner of God's dealing with His servants during times of polygamy, we gain important light and help on how He wishes us to approach our problem.

Abraham and Jacob

Abraham's taking of Hagar is a clear example of polygamy. Concubines are sometimes scripturally referred to as wives to indicate how close the two states are.⁶ Whilst we believe this to have been misguided and wrong, would Abraham countenance the description of his action as equivalent to adultery? But those who interpret the 'one flesh' phrase as recognising only a single and exclusive marital relationship as binding and valid would do so. Jacob's situation in having a greater love for his second wife is not unusual in lands where arranged marriages for

family and political reasons are still frequent. It emphasises the considerable anguish potentially caused by those who believe that the chronological sequence of marriage itself dictates the choice of the wives to be divorced. Again the Lord is seen to explicitly favour and hearken to cries from both Leah and then from Rachel for children from within their respective polygamous marriages with Jacob.⁷ God's answer requires a blessing upon the very relationship in which they are each engaged. Yet joyfully they praise Him for unequivocally granting them their desires. Do we ever read of such an extraordinary response for an adulteress? On the contrary, David's first child died as censure for his adultery with Bathsheba, despite his pleas.⁸

David and Solomon

Both David and Solomon were to be blamed not only for their polygamy being dissonant with Genesis 2, but also for their breach of Deuteronomy 17.16-17. Both kings, especially Solomon, did excessively multiply wives to themselves. There is no particular mystery in God's toleration of these events in the context of the rest of God's OT dealings, (although all His grace is most mysterious). But if polygamy is axiomatically equivalent to adultery – then His tolerance is nothing short of being both astonishing and inconsistent.

Nathan's reproof

The sharp gulf of distinction between the sins of adultery and polygamy is particularly conspicuous in Nathan's

reproof of David after the affair with Bathsheba. Here we must be careful that we do not intend either to overturn or reinterpret the moral law, but as is fitting, test the validity of our interpretation of the law, when we hear a prophet expounding it. Firstly, in correspondence with the requirements of Leviticus 20:10, Nathan so accurately depicts the situation in his parable that David pronounces his own worthiness of death. The only basis of the removal of the sentence is Nathan's emphatic assertion that God has mysteriously taken away David's sin (not the law requiring the death penalty). David also acknowledges this later in Psalm 51. Secondly, there is a severe, swift and crushing reproof for his action and the motive that was its spring. How different from the restrained silence of the Scripture on David's polygamy. Thirdly, still more strikingly, David's polygamy is turned against him as an argument to highlight the extremity of his wantonness and ingratitude in 2 Samuel 12:8. God gave into his bosom the wives of Saul. If the term 'into thy bosom' has only the sense of Saul's wives being under David's protection, what place does it have here in reproving the seizing of what was not his to take? If so, it is irrelevant to Nathan's argument. In the context, the phrase is used in the parable, of the poor man, of an intimate, physical affection, v3. Only a strong hermeneutical violence can wrest from this text the sense of an explicit toleration of polygamy.

Compelled divorce after the Exile

Ezra's firm and determined handling of the foreign wives in chapters 9 and 10, by compelling the Israelites to divorce, has been cited as normative for the handling of polygamous converts. This is a serious mistake for several reasons. We remember firstly that the sentence that Israel was commanded to apply to idolaters in Deuteronomy 17:2-5 was crystal clear. Deuteronomy 13:6-9 makes plain that this law applied strictly even to parents. The issue in Ezra is not of polygamy, but the intense and almost engulfing danger of the pollution of Israel's worship by intermarriage with so many pagan wives. Heading off this catastrophe, Ezra takes the most radical action short of widespread execution. He compels divorce from all the foreign wives and separation from their children. There are other considerable differences between the situations; the Jews in Ezra were already under God's covenant, the action in hand was a specific breach of explicit law, and that breach is alleged several times in the parallel passages. Would Ezra have taken such fierce and radical action with Abraham or Jacob, or David, or even Solomon, except on the ground that their wives were foreigners? Nathan's divinely appointed example suggests very much the opposite.⁸ Ezra's situation and that with polygamous converts are in stark contrast. In the latter case they had acted in ignorance. They are married to their own kind, with no prohibitive ethnic divide. They have not c

tracted new obligations but carefully seek to be faithful to God in the old. There is no powerfully undermining threat of slipping into a new idolatry, for they have forsaken their old religion. The ground of the marriage vows they uttered, they have kept intact, nor have they violated their consciences.

Unlawful promises and their consequences.

Should unlawful vows and oaths always be broken? More precisely, what distinguishes a vow to be kept from a vow to be broken, when it becomes apparent that the law is contravened by it? A most significant example is Joshua's treaty to the Gibeonites in Joshua 9, obtained by deceit and in direct contravention of God's commands to utterly destroy the inhabitants of the land. Yet 'the children of Israel smote them not, because the princes of the congregation had sworn unto them by the LORD God of Israel.' Joshua 9:18. This promise was subsequently taken so seriously that it formed grounds of defending the Gibeonites against an alliance of their fellow countrymen. Yet more significantly, when centuries later Saul in misguided zeal for the Lord's name slaughtered the Gibeonites, the Lord's fierce anger at the seriousness of the betrayal would not be appeased until seven of Saul's own sons were slain before Gibeon. In Numbers 30:2 the Lord indicates that vows are not to be lightly broken that they might not lightly be made. Is not specific authorisation therefore necessary to breach one of the most important vows of all?

Polygamy is a tainted form of wedlock, disapproved of but recognised and tolerated by the Lord God in the Old Testament in His law and in His acts. It entails lifelong vows and obligations, which Eastern society regard a matter of honour and integrity to uphold. It is a state with profound and lasting consequences for children and wives alike. Since Christ declares that He neither abrogates or violates that which He revealed before through His servants, the default position is that of the law of Moses. Without specific warrant we have no authority to compel divorce, and in doing so are in grave danger of requiring more than the Lord Himself. Not only do we make a very difficult and dangerous situation more explosive, we risk violating the consciences of those we have won, and of those who watch. We may provoke fierce and untempered reactions in young believers and their partners, and supremely hazard the wrath of God for offending them and injuring His name among them. Unless there is clear evidence to the contrary in the New Testament, polygyny should therefore be tolerated in those who sincerely apply to join the church, but only in those who have incurred these obligations prior to conversion.

New Testament law

Luke 16:17-18 and Matthew 5:31-32 both indicate the high and solemn regard the Lord has for marital vows, vows undertaken sincerely but ignorantly in polygamous households. They do not license the imposition of divorce by an external party, given that the law

of God recognises, but does not approve, polygamy as a marital state. Other texts like 1 Corinthians 7:2-4 and Ephesians 5: 33 cast polygamy into a shameful light, and render it unacceptable and inadmissible as a phenomenon in the Church, but they do not validate the involuntary severance of those who have previously taken lifetime pledges to each other, albeit in the darkness of Islam.

The three texts of 1 Tim. 3.2, 1 Tim.3.12, and Titus 1.6, which address the qualifications of an office bearer, confirm that polygamy is to be frowned upon and removed from any place of example or influence in the church, but it would be peculiar to ban polygamists by such an expression.

Calvin's comments on the texts are of particular interest. Summarising his case on Titus, he states, 'Polygamy was so common among the Jews, that the wicked custom had nearly passed into a law. If any man had married two wives before he had made a profession of Christianity, it would be cruel to compel him to divorce one of them; and therefore the apostles endured what was in itself faulty, because they could not correct it. Besides, they who had involved themselves by marrying more than one wife at a time, even though they had been prepared to testify to their repentance by retaining but one wife, had nevertheless given a good sign of their incontinence, which might have been a brand on their good name'.⁹

Comparatively few authorities express an opinion on handling converted

polygamists that dissents from Calvin. There can be very little doubt too that the best authorities concur that polygamy did exist among the Jews and perhaps also the Gentiles in the times of the New Testament.^{10,11} At the least it was a very real potential problem for New Testament pastors.

The 'traditional' view - what was apostolic practice?

There appears to be no universal traditional view among evangelical churches upon this particular question. Our tradition must be apostolic practice. John Calvin was by no means alone in believing that the apostles in the face of a polygamous society admitted them to the Lord's table and fellowship without requiring prior divorce. Matthew Poole¹² Albert Barnes¹³ and Robert Dabney¹⁴ are some of the worthies who took the same position. The steely-backed and uncompromising Wong Ming Dao who was actually faced with the problem of polygamy in pagan China supported the article as apostolic in the face of detractors, and gave gentle counsel to **those polygamists** admitted to the church **who** had to bear the scorn of **opponents** of his policy.¹⁵ None of **the historic** confessions give explicit **guidance** on this question, although **all** testify that monogamy must be regarded as the only proper and lawful form of matrimony.

Conclusions

Polygamy is an evil, but an evil which the **Western mind** too readily equates entirely with outright infidelity. It is an

evil, like divorce, for which the Lord Himself exercised tolerance in a manner which he strictly forbade for adultery. It is never to be tolerated in new marriages in the Church, once light and instruction upon the matter has been given. Yet for those who have already entered into polygamous marriages before conversion, weighty lifelong commitments and obligations have been undertaken, obligations the Lord recognises. The husband has promised not only to protect and provide for wives and children, but also to love and cherish them. One may not be set apart without great social dishonour, shame and grief, especially for the wife and children involved. For those unconverted partners who decide to leave their spouses, we are required by the New Testament to release them without hindrance. But for those who wish to remain together in marriage, we have no scriptural authority to compel a divorce. Salvation from Islam often involves the intense agony and shame of our brothers and sisters, the loss of very close family bonds, employment, and friends. We are under dual obligation to Christ and to them not to modify the Lord's requirements. They already face a baptism of fire. Do we aim to add fuel to the flames? Our overriding concern must be to the glory of God in His church, the purity of His worship and the obedience of His saints. If, by adding to His commands, we impose a yoke on these young saints that we ourselves have not and will not have to bear, there is grave danger of violating all three.

- 1 Matthew 5:19
- 2 Luke 16:17
- 3 Acts 15:10
- 4 Psalm 119:160
- 5 Matthew 12:1-4
- 6 Genesis 37:2 & Judges 19:3-5
- 7 Genesis 29: 31,32. 30:2,6,17,22,24
- 8 2 Samuel 12: 16-19
- 9 Commentary, in loc.
- 10 11th century Takkanah by Rabbi Gershom ben Judah technically outlawed polygamy for the first time.
- 11 Edersheim, A. Sketches in Jewish Social Life.
- 12 Commentary, in loc.
- 13 Commentary in loc.
- 14 Systematic Theology on the 7th commandment.
- 15 The Christian and Marriage, (Hong Kong) is illustrative of his approach.

BOOK REVIEW

McConnell, C. Douglas, ed. 1997. *The Holy Spirit and Mission Dynamics*, Evangelical Missiological Society Series, Num. 5. Pasadena: William Carey Library. Reviewed by David Greenlee

In this work, Douglas McConnell draws together papers from the 1996 Evangelical Missiological Society meeting which focused on the role of the Holy Spirit in missions. American scholars contributing to the work include Pentecostals and Evangelicals such as Michael Pocock (Dallas Theological Seminary), Robertson McQuilkin (Columbia International University), Peter Wagner (Fuller School of World Missions), Gary McGee (Assemblies of God Theological Seminary), Scott Moreau (Wheaton College), and Robert Priest (Columbia International University). One chapter is a reprint of a work of Roland Allen from the early 1900's.

The book is divided into three main sections: **biblical theological issues**, **historical issues**, and **contemporary issues**.

The **biblical theological section** is solid and, like many sermons or Bible studies, refreshing and well worth reading even though it adds little new to the debate.

The **historical section** lacks breadth, as admitted by the editor. Gary McGee's contribution from a Pentecostal perspective is interesting but the book would be better served if balanced by a complementary piece from a non-

Pentecostal. While McGee illustrates from history how diverse missions of the 1800's and 1900's sought sanctifying from the Holy Spirit, including healing and immediate (or anticipated) language learning, I found something of a distraction from the central issue debated, that of spiritual warfare.

On the other hand, the book is valuable in obtaining just to read the chapters reprinted from a little-known work of Roland Allen. Central to Allen's perspective is the concept that the apostles, arriving at a decision in a question of doubt² were guided solely by the sense of the Spirit behind the action, not by any speculations as to consequences which might ensue." If they had heeded the perceived consequences over and above the source of guidance, many times they would have failed to carry out God's purpose. "Nowhere is the Spirit revealed as the Spirit who guides men by enabling them to anticipate the results of their action."

The **contemporary issues section** is the most important part of the book. (However, the biblical and historical sections are important too, since issues discussed there have too often been glossed over in books on spiritual warfare.) Peter Wagner, invited to give an overview of his position on spiritual warfare, does so in the form of a biography. Scott Moreau, Robert Priest, John Orme and Gailyn V. Rhee respond in turn to various aspects of Wagner's presentation.

do so with respect for Wagner as a brother in Christ, but each vigorously pursues key weaknesses in Wagner's approach.

Moreau first challenges Wagner for mixing up reporting and advocacy with scholarship. Wagner too often responds to his critics without identifying them, short-circuiting the process of letting readers study both sides of an issue. Further, he suggests significant new interpretations of Scriptures in support of his views on spiritual warfare, admitting that they rarely find support in existing commentaries. Wagner has "gone public" in a very influential way, without first submitting his ideas for the reflection and correction of biblical scholars and missiologists. Finally, Moreau challenges the use of "spiritual technology" as presenting not the best but the worst of Western and non-Western thinking.

Robert Priest in part revisits his 1994 article which presented a major challenge to Wagner and his followers. Priest is concerned with Wagner's avoidance of dealing with issues appropriately (that is, appropriate scholarly debate) and his insistence on "new" truths and understandings. Priest says that, in fact, it is not the specific spiritual warfare teaching, but the epistemology that allows "truth" to be discovered from demons and occult practitioners and to supplement biblical truth with such "truth," that is of the greatest concern. This is heightened by the very public platform available to Wagner for his teaching.

Much of John Orme's article deals with hermeneutics. He fears that on issues such as identificational repentance Wagner has resorted to a "canon within the canon," that is, a select group of passages, rather than considering the whole body of Scripture. He questions the theological assumptions linking Old Testament "models" and the covenant structure of Israel to the issues facing us today. Further, Orme says, "even Wagner admits that the New Testament contains no outright or explicit teaching about 'identificational repentance' and that we find relatively little about it in the New Testament." Orme suggests that Wagner's repeated use of assumptions results in "a hermeneutical grid without sufficient substance to construct a doctrine."

Gailyn Van Rheenen's concluding chapter, dealing with modern and postmodern syncretism, provides a thought-provoking and appropriate closure to the book (although it should be read understanding that he is addressing a Western audience). He points out that syncretism has been a challenge to the Church in every age and that we should expect the same now. He warns against two dangers, that of redefining Christianity in terms of New Age spirituality, and that of an excessive fixation on the demonic realm. Wagner, he fears, falls into the second trap as he develops "spiritual technology" to obtain a "power boost" for missions. Demons in the Bible, Van Rheenen argues, are cast out by the power of God, not human intelligence.

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Finally, according to Van Rheezen, we must avoid a focus on power over truth. He shows how this shift in emphasis can be linked to postmodernity as opposed to modernity. God's power is based on love and builds up; Satan's power is debasing. "When Christianity is reduced to power, the Christian message is always significantly distorted." How do we respond when God, who has all ultimate power, decides not to act? How do we understand God's leading? Increasingly, he says, emotions and intuition are seen to be the working of the Holy Spirit. "When I have an intuition it is the Holy Spirit speaking to me. When I have an emotion, it has been generated by the Holy Spirit." Biblical language is used, but formed out of popular narratives. Such "guidance" is becoming common in the Church and is too often seen in the writings of men such as Wagner.

I have waited many years for a book like this! Although there have been occasional papers published critiquing the "prayer warfare" movement's theology and practice, this volume finally provides a broad response to the issues raised. Let us increase intercession, but let us do so grounded in God's Word!

MINISTRY RESOURCES

Feedback—One of our readers says the following:

"I have just finished reading MK's very helpful article in Seedbed 13.1, *Five-Principles I Believe In*. I appreciated his thoughtful and balanced comments. As someone who has been involved with Arabic Christian publishing for a number of years I was particularly struck by his list of subjects which MBBs feel need addressing. It was helpful, thank you.

"But what are we going to do about it? Surely it is not beyond the imagination of the Christian world to produce books, tapes or even videos in Arabic that address these issues? Some of the issues are addressed in existing Arabic publications. (For example, John Stott's *Issues facing Christians Today—Arabic: al-masihiya wal-qadaya al-ma'asira*, available from Dar eth-Thaqafa, Cairo). Perhaps not all the material that already exists is entirely suitable. Maybe the format is wrong or it doesn't address the precise issues being raised. Also I realise that Christians do have different perspectives on many of these things and not all of the materials give a balanced point of view. But nonetheless we should be seeking to make available to our Christian brothers such materials as do already exist. Who knows, it may well stimulate one of them to write something better!

"Perhaps not all readers of Seedbed are aware of the resources available in Arabic or where to get them. A good place to begin is the Catalogue of

Arabic Resources for Ministry, which can be obtained from AMC, PO Box 6925, 3311 Limassol, Cyprus, E-mail: amc@logos.cy.net (US\$15). If you do not have access to Christian Bookshops you can contact MECO Literature, PO Box 662, 6306 Larnaca, Cyprus; E-mail: soniaw@vtvcy.charis.co.uk." PJB

New Ministry Resources

A colleague working in Europe has drawn up **an inductive Bible study series oriented particularly to the needs of women MBBs**. With minor modifications the studies would also be applicable to men. The series is still in the evaluative and revision stage, so has not yet been published. Look for more explicit information as to how to obtain the studies in the next issue of Seedbed. If you would like to use the studies in their present form as part of the evaluative process, we may be able to negotiate this with the author.

An Arab author has edited an **Arabic Gospel according to Luke**, published by Dar al-Jeel in Beirut under the title *Al-Injeel*. The accompanying notes speak sensitively to common questions and objections which Muslims have concerning the Gospel, the Bible and Christian theological concepts. A cursory examination indicates that this publication may be significant in making the Gospel both more attractive and more understandable to Arab Muslims. We will include a more thorough review in the next issue of Seedbed, *in sha' Allah*.

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