

الإنسان، الخطيئة، والغفران

Humanity, Sin & Salvation *In Islam and Christianity*

Article Two: The Definition of Sin in Islamic Theology, the Qur'an and the Hadith

Introduction

Our understanding of sin is extremely important. It affects, and is affected by, many other areas of doctrine. Our view of the nature of God, for instance, influences our understanding of sin. If God is a very high, pure and uncompromising Being who expects all humans to be as He is, then the slightest deviation from his lofty standard is sin, and man's condition is very serious. If, on the other hand, God is Himself rather imperfect, then man's condition is not so serious. Thus, in a real sense, our understanding of sin will be a reflection of our understanding of God.

Our view of the nature of man also bears on our understanding of sin. If intended to reflect the nature of God, man is to be judged, not by how he compares with other humans, but how he measures up to the divine standard. Any failure to meet that standard is sin. If man is a free being, that is, if he is not simply determined by forces of nature, then he is responsible for his

actions, and his shortcomings will be graded more severely than if some determining force controls or severely limits what he is capable of choosing and doing.

Our understanding of sin will strongly influence our view of salvation. For if man is basically good, his intellectual and moral capabilities essentially intact, then whatever problems he encounters with respect to his standing before God will be relatively minor. Any difficulty he experiences can be attributed to ignorance, a lack of knowledge as to what he ought to do or how to do it. Guidance, as Muslims claim, will solve the problem. A good model or example is all that is needed. If, on the other hand, man is corrupt and rebellious, and thus either unable or unwilling to do what he knows is right, a more radical cure will be needed. There will have to be actual transformation of the person. Thus the more radical our conception of sin the more supernatural the salvation we will deem needed.

**The Nature of Sin in Islamic
Theology (*Aqida, Tawhid, Kalam*)**
العقيدة، التوحيد، الكلام

The Semitic words for sin used in the Old Testament and the Qur'an are etymologically the same, e.g., *Akhatt'a, Khatia* أخطأ أو خَطِئَة (to miss the mark). The New Testament Greek, *hamartia*, does not add new meanings. The words imply breaking or not conforming to some standard. The lenient attitude which the Qur'an espouses regarding sinners is heeded by Islam. Yet the doctrine of sin, including the distinction between light and heavy sins and their respective punishments; was the object of serious controversy in early Islam.

Muslim theologians in the *Mishkat Al Masabih* مشكاة المصابيح have defined good deeds and sin as follows: "Observances of ... duties is called virtue *حُسن*, and the negligence or breach thereof is called sin *سيئة*. Virtues *حسنات* and sins *سيئات* result from lawful and unlawful things In every act there is sin and virtue Any breach of the fundamental duties of which the performance is compulsory and obligatory is called a great sin. Any breach of other duties is called a minor sin. Breach of any duty which the Holy Prophet used to do constantly without any break is a great sin. Constant repetition of a minor sin makes it a major one". (Mishkat III, pp. 121-129)

It would be helpful at this juncture to explain lawful and unlawful actions in Islamic law (*Shari'ah* الشريعة), especially when sin is defined in terms of doing or not doing these actions.

A. Lawful مشروع

1. Those which are obligatory (*fardh* الفرض), being enjoined by God Himself. Disobedience of these is positive infidelity and punishable as such.
2. Those which are a duty but, though constituting sin when neglected, do not amount to infidelity to the faith (*wajib* الواجب).
3. Those which were practiced by Muhammad (sunna السنة).
4. Those that are considered commendable (*mustahab* المستحب).
5. Those which are permitted (*mubah* المباح). They are indifferent and can be committed or omitted without fear of sin.

B. Unlawful غير المشروع

1. That which is vicious and most corrupting, mortal sin (*muftsid* المُفْسِد).
2. That which is distinctly forbidden (*haram* الحَرَام).
3. That which is generally considered as unclean or undesired (*makruh* المَكْرُوه).

Mishkat III pp. 121-129, also (from *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, p.251)

C. Heavy and Light Sins

Subsequently Islamic theologians divided sins into *Gunhah-kabirah* جُنْح كَبِيرَة (Major Infraction) and *Gunhah-saghirah* جُنْح صَغِيرَة (Minor Infraction), great and little sins. Among the four Islamic schools of law, there is no agreement on the exact number of *kabirah* sins (The "Mishkat" lists 53, vol. III, p.128); however the following seventeen are generally agreed upon.

Al-Ghazzali cites Abu Talib al Makki's view that the seventeen are as follows:

Four in the heart, to wit:

1. Kufr الكُفر (polytheism)
2. Persevering in sin
3. Despairing of Allah's mercy
4. False Security (imagined immunity against the wrath of Allah)

Four in the tongue, to wit:

5. False witness
6. Abusing the *muhsan* (falsely charging a Muslim with adultery)
7. False oath (perjury)
8. Sorcery (although this is very commonly done by many Muslims—and that in agreement with Islam!)

Three in the belly:

9. Drinking of alcoholic beverages
10. Appropriation of the property of orphans
11. Usury

Two in the genitals:

12. Adultery (fornication)
13. Pederasty [unnatural sexual act]

Two in the hands

14. Theft
15. Murder

One in the feet:

16. Fleeing in battle before infidel enemies

One in the whole body:

17. Disobedience to parents

(From *The Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam*, p.251)

Muslim theologians have also provided solutions for the different categories of sins.

1. 'Light sins' سيئات may be repaired by good works حسنات.
2. 'Heavy sins' require seeking forgiveness of Allah ('*istighfar* استغفار)
3. 'Shirk' شرك, the severest of sins, requires repentance (*taubah* توبة)

Mishkat III pp. 121-129, also (from *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, p.251)

Sin in The Qur'an

There are many words in the Qur'an that are used to distinguish between varying degrees of sins. I will only mention 17 of them.

1. *Khati'a* خطية : tumbling, missing the aim, committing an error; a sin committed on purpose (17:31 = 'khit', the same root word)
2. *Zanb* ذنب : a sin, a crime (compare 24: 14 and 81:9), also used for the 'faults' or *zanb* of Mohammed (47:19 and 48:2)
3. *Ithm* إثم : anything forbidden in the law, a heavy sin, 5:2
4. *Shirk* شرك : adding a partner to Allah, polytheism, 31:13
5. *Fahsha* فحشاء : vile deed, crime, and adultery, 6:151
6. *Wizr* وِزْر : sin as a heavy load, burden, encumbrance, 94:1-3
7. *Dhalal* ضلال : straying, to be lost, 6-8
8. *Zulm* ظلم : Injustice, iniquity, unfairness, 26:10
9. *Foujoor* فجور : immorality, depravity, 82:14-15

10. *Sayyi'a* سَيِّئَة : offence, misdeed, 27:90
11. *Su'* سُوء : evil, misfortune, 4:123
12. *Fasad* فَسَاد : corrupting, 2: 205
13. *Fisq* فِسْق : viciousness, moral depravity, 2: 99
14. *Buhtan* بُهْتَان : slander, lying, 24:16
15. *Sharr* شَر : evil, 99: 8
16. *Asyan* عَصْيَان : disobedience, 4:14
17. *Ghai* غَي : error or going astray, 20:121; 53:2

A summary of what the Qur'an teaches about sin

- "Those who avoid great sins (*ithm* اِثْم), and shameful deeds (*foahish* فَوَاحِش), only (falling into) small faults, verily thy Lord is ample in forgiveness". 53:32
- "Nay, those who seek gain in Evil, and are girt round by their sins (*khati'a* خَطِيْئَة), they are companions of the fire: therein shall they abide (forever)". 2:81
- "Kill not your children for fear of want: We shall provide sustenance for them as well as for you: Verily the killing of them is a great sin". (*khati'a* خَطِيْئَة) 17:31
- "Allah forgiveth not that partners should be set up (*shirk* شِرْك) with Him; but He forgiveth anything else, to whom He pleaseth". 4:48
- "Those who go on increasing in unbelief (*kufr* كُفْر)—Allah will not forgive them nor guide them on the Way". 4:137
- "Those who reject (*kafar* كَفَر) Allah, and hinder (men) from the Path of Allah, then die rejecting Allah — Allah will not forgive them". 47:34

• "O Our people, hearken to the one who invites (you) to Allah and believes in him: He will forgive you your faults [*zanb* ذَنْب], and deliver you from a grievous penalty". 46:31

Sin in the Hadith

Narrated Al-Harith bin Suwaid: The Prophet said: "A believer sees his sins as if he were sitting under a mountain which he is afraid may fall on him; whereas a wicked person considers his sins as flies passing over his nose, and he just drives them away." (*Sahih Al-Bukhari* 8:320)

This verse certainly presents an ideal, but it may be far from reality. Indeed, some Muslims are fearful of the impact of sin in their lives. One teacher of the Qur'an related that his concern about sexual lust leads him to fast every Friday in an effort to obtain mental purity. It is not uncommon for Muslims to ask the Imams what to do for their persistent sins, and the Imams prescribe some works for them. On the other hand, most Muslims I have met are quite unconcerned about the impact sin may have in their everyday existence.

Abdullah ibn Abbas narrated: Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him) said, "The black stone descended from Paradise whiter than milk, but the sins of the descendants of Adam made it black." Ahmad and Tirmidhi transmitted it, the latter saying that this is a well substantiated (*hasan sahih*) tradition. (*Mishkat* 2577)

Muhammad defined two focuses of transgression

Narrated Sahl bin Sa'd: Narrated Allah's

Apostle: "Whoever can guarantee (the chastity of) what is between his two jaw-bones and what is between his two legs (i.e. his tongue and his private parts), I guarantee Paradise for him." (8:481). Incurrigible speech and unlawful sex, then, draw the Muslim away from the path of Allah.

Muhammad, however, distinguished between thoughts and action

Abu Hurayra narrated: The Prophet said, "Allah has forgiven my followers the evil thoughts (*Hadith al-nafs* حديث النفس) that occur in their minds, as long as such thoughts are not put into action or uttered." 7:147

So sinful thoughts which do not issue into reality are not sin. It is even said that no account of these thoughts is taken in the computation of sins on the day of Resurrection. The ideal is expressed in the following tradition: "The Apostle of Allah said: 'Allah does not take into account what the members of my community think as long as they do not pronounce it or carry it out.'" *Muslim* 201-208.

Another sin highlighted in the Hadith is greed

Abdullah ibn Abbas narrated: I heard the Prophet (peace be upon him) saying, "If the son of Adam (the human being) had two valleys of money, he would wish for a third, for nothing can fill the belly of Adam's son except dust, and Allah forgives him who repents to Him." (*Sahih Al-Bukhari*, 8:444). And again in 8:445; 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." And yet again in 8:446, Sahl ibn Sa'd narrated: I heard ibn az-Zubayr, who was in the pulpit at Makkah delivering a sermon, saying, "O men! The Prophet (peace be upon him) used to say, 'If the son of Adam were given a valley full of gold, he would love to have a second one; and if he were given the second one, he would love to have a third, for nothing fills the belly of Adam's son except dust. And Allah forgives him who repents to Him.'"

Ubayy said, "We considered this as a saying from the Qur'an till the surah (beginning with) 'The mutual rivalry for piling up of worldly things diverts you ...' (102:1) was revealed."

Other enumerations of sins to be avoided are found in the following hadith from *Mishkat III*, pp.129-139:

"Abdullah-b-Mas'ud reported that a man asked (Mohammed): '...what sin is greatest near Allah?' He replied: 'Your calling up a partner for Allah'... 'What is next?' He replied: 'Your killing of your child ...'. 'What is next?' He replied: '...adultery'."

"Abdullah-b-Amr reported that the Apostle of Allah said: 'The greatest

sins are to associate a partner with Allah, to disobey parents, to kill a soul and to take false oath'."

Abu Hurayrah reported that the Messenger of Allah said: "Avoid seven harmful things.... Setting up a partner with Allah, sorcery, killing a soul whom Allah has made unlawful except for just cause, devouring the properties of an orphan, keeping behind on the day of fight and slandering chaste, believing heedless women".

"Mu'az reported that the Apostle of Allah instructed me with ten counsels. He said: Set up nothing with Allah... nor be disobedient to your parents... nor give up the compulsory prayers... nor drink wine... beware of flight from holy war... and spend for your family out of your means...."

"Safwan-b-Assai reported.... Set up nothing with Allah, nor steal, nor commit adultery, nor kill a soul... nor take an innocent man to a man of power that he may put him to death, nor practice sorcery, nor devour interest nor cast blasphemy on a chaste woman, nor turn back for fight...."

And finally, there are Hadith that imply that Allah will forgive any sin, except perhaps that of *shirk*.

Tirmidhi transmitted: Anas ibn Malik heard the Prophet (peace be upon him) say: Allah, the Exalted, has said: "O son of Adam! Certainly I shall continue to pardon thee so long as thou supplicatest Me and hopest (for My forgiveness), whatever may be thy faults and sins, I don't care.

O son of Adam, even if thy sins pile up as high as the sky, and thou askest for My forgiveness, I will forgive thee. O son of Adam, if thou comest to Me with an earthful of defaults and meetest Me, not associating anything with Me, I will come to thee, with an earthful of forgiveness." (*Mishkat* 0442 (R))

Implications

1. We risk offering answers to questions that are not being asked (e.g., offering salvation when they are only looking for right guidance). Muslims have said we do not need a transformation, only reformation. They do not need a saviour, only guidance!

2. It is very clear that Islam defines sin in terms of required work or actions not being done or forbidden work or actions being done, rather than as an integral part of human nature

Though Islam speaks of a free man we find that the Qur'anic and Hadith evidence in many cases indicates the opposite. For example the following:

Al-Bukhari records in 4:506: Abu Hurayrah narrated: The Prophet (peace be upon him) said, "When any human being is born, Satan touches him at both sides of the body with his two fingers, except Jesus, the son of Mary, whom Satan tried to touch but failed, for he touched the placenta-cover instead."

Muhammad's earliest biographer, Ibn Hisham, quoted the prophet as saying: "Two men in white raiment ... opened up my belly, extracted a black drop from it and threw it away; then they washed my heart and my belly with

snow until they had thoroughly cleaned them." (Ibn Hisham, ed., *The life of Muhammad: (Ibn) Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah*, trans. Al Guillaume, London: Oxford University Press, 1955, p.72).

3. The Islamic approach to sin is problematic. A mild view of sin combined with the expectation of generous forgiveness and mercy does away with a need for salvation and a Saviour. Adherence to Islam and performing its rules is deemed sufficient. As Christians we perceive this to be a disturbing act of deception. We know that the Bible contradicts such a view of sin altogether.

4. The view of sin has serious consequences on the view of God. God is not consistent when it comes to his holiness and his standard of holiness for mankind. A concept of fatalism also comes into the picture very clearly. Despite good or bad deeds, God still might or might not forgive.

5. The worldviews of Judaism, Christianity and Islam are similar enough to aid communication. The similarity between the Jewish and Muslim reliance on the Law and also their common Middle East context suggest that following the models of Jesus, Paul in Romans, and the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews could be very helpful.

6. Mentioning Hadith about the sin of man and the list of sins could prove helpful as you share with Muslims about the depravity of man. I have used these as a format to show their

need for a savior because their works could not get them to paradise.

7. There is a proverb that is used among Muslims in Egypt that says, "Whatever is in us is in us even if we go on pilgrimage and come back." It shows that on a popular level there is a realization that man is sinful and needs help.

8. Perhaps more can be made of Sura 12:53 to show the need for transformation

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

"Nor do I absolve my own self (of blame): the (human) soul is certainly prone to evil, unless my Lord do bestow His Mercy: but surely my Lord is Oft-forgiving, Most Merciful."

Next article will deal with the original sin of Adam. Till we meet again إلى اللقاء .

Abu Atallah