



The Interpretation of Love and Law from the Qur'anic and Biblical Perspectives

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Abstract

Although the word “love” appears less frequently in the Qur’an than in the Bible, Love is a cornerstone of both Islam and Christianity. As the Bible and the Qur’an agree on many things, why then do Muslims and Christians perceive each other so differently and so often misunderstand each other? Such a question, of course, deserves an in-depth, multi-faceted answer; however, we will look at just one of those facets: a difference of emphasis and vocabulary. This paper tries to pick up some salient points about the nature and function of the love and law as given in the Bible and Qur’an itself. The Qur’an seems to be in accord with this viewpoint, giving priority to love although not neglecting the necessity and reality of law. The verses of Qur’an open with the conception of a beneficent and merciful God Who is the Lord and Sustainer of all the worlds that He creates. This perpetual providence or sustenance implies love for what is sustained. But having emphasized these attributes, another attribute of God follows that He is the Lord of the Day of Judgment. He is the Supreme Judge Who first made the laws and then watches life to see whether it is following those laws. Love apart from law and reason is an abstraction, and ‘law,’ devoid of the foundation of love, would become a tyranny and a burden, hampering life instead of advancing it. This essay also indicates the attitude of Jesus and Christianity towards Law. Jesus said that he had not come to destroy the law of Moses but to fulfill it. His main function and mission was to turn humanity towards the spirit more than the letter of the law. Soon after him Christianity unburdened itself of the cumbersome corpus of almost the entire Jewish law. But when [the] Christian Church became powerful and Christianity became a State religion, laws were required both for religious and for secular life. The State legislated for its own necessities and the Church developed Canon Law.

Keywords: Interpretation of love, Love in Bible, Love in Qur’an, Law in Bible, Law in Qur’an

INTRODUCTION

Low and Love in Christianity

Jesus was no violent revolutionary and [he] made no formal attack on the entire system of Jewish law. He wanted to spiritualize it and internalize it by [promoting] new attitudes. Only in the matter of

divorce he seems to have said something that went against the accepted Jewish law. Otherwise we find him saying, "it was said unto you but I say ..." whatever he adds does not contradict the previous law but adds a necessary inner attitude towards it. When he was found not observing a ritual or following a law that the rigid priesthood demanded, and [was] asked whether he had come

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to destroy the law, he said that he had not come to destroy but to fulfill it.

Jesus protested against the burdening of the soul with excessive legalism, but the protest was not emphatic enough to shatter this overgrown and complicated structure. A large part of it actually needed to be razed to ground so that the liberated human soul could breathe freely. The mission of great prophethood is the liberation of the human soul from [the] chains [that were] welded by rigid traditionalism and shackles forged by man himself. Jesus said he had come not to destroy the law but to fulfill it and whoever violates a jot or tittle of the Law shall go to Hell. But this fulfillment, in order to be effective, needed considerable destruction [and] as Rumi said, "you cannot build a new house [with] a new plan unless you destroy the old structure."

St Paul and other Jesus did not hesitate to draw the logical conclusion from the outlook of Jesus with respect to 'Law as Life. They began to say in open words, without mincing matters, that the Law was a curse and that the advent of Jesus had superseded it by Love.

But Love by itself may be a sufficiently regulative principle among a community of saints, though it is doubtful that even there it could suffice if the saints, ascetics or monks want to live well-regulated lives in a monastery. As we have already stated, during the first three centuries of the Christian era the Christian community without a State required no civil or criminal law. During this period all the laws that they required were those necessary for the organization of the Church. During these centuries Christianity was a non-legal religion but with the sudden acquisition of political power by conversion to Christianity of the Emperor Constantine, it was impossible to continue this indifference to [the] Law. Jesus had given them no laws and had exhorted them to follow the Jewish law adding only inner spiritual attitude to external observances.

We pass on now to Islam which was a continuation of Judaism and Christianity.

Law in Islam

A critic of the Qur'an, who was found of mystical and metaphysical aspects of religion, complained that the Qur'an, like some portions of the Old Testament, is full of fight. It must be acknowledged that it is so because Islam envisaged human life as a battleground of good and evil and the purpose of life is to combat evil in thought, word and deed. The Prophet of Islam was engaged in this struggle all his life and fought the evil that he found around him by wisdom, by love, and when there was no other alternative, he did not hesitate to curb violent evil by violence. He is reported to have said: "**when you see any evil, remove it with your hands by doing something actively about its eradication. If you cannot do that, then cry aloud against it in protest. But if you feel so helpless that you cannot even shout against it, then detest it in your heart-this last alternative is the weakest side of faith.**"

Let us take the Qur'an first which is the fountainhead of the Islamic faith. The Qur'an does not present any elaborate and systematic code of laws; it does not call itself a book of laws. It characterizes itself as the book of wisdom-it is *Kitab-ul-Hakim* and not *Kitab-ul-Ahkam*. The laws and regulations found in Qur'an are few and far between. Nor is it a book of any detailed rituals-necessary rituals about Pilgrimage and a few other essential practices are found in the Qur'an, but the general attitude of the Qur'an is that it has clearly pronounced ritual to be of a very secondary importance not to be identified with righteousness itself.

"It is not righteousness that while offering prayers you turn your face towards the East or the West." (Qur'an 2:177)

Let us try to pick up some salient points about the nature and function of the law as given in the Qur'an itself.

(1) The Qur'an revelation styles itself as law of liberty, an act of mercy vouchsafed by God to mankind in order to soften the rigidities of previous systems of law. It suppresses the austerities and numerous interdictions imposed on

the Jews by the Mosaic law or the accretions and interpolations of the scribes who attributed them to Jehovah and Moses.

(2) The Qur'an has a positive attitude towards life, disapproving [of] the exaggeration of austerity, which weakens the body and suppresses the natural instincts of man. It exhorts the believer to enjoy the good things of life provided he observes the due measure. The Professor of Islamic Laws and Institutions in the University of Rome, who has contributed an admirable article on the subject in the *Legacy of Islam*, has also come to the conclusion that the spirit of Islamic law is allowing as large a latitude in human conduct-as is possible within the limits of reason and morality.

He says, "We may agree with the Muslim jurists, when they teach that the fundamental rule of law is liberty ... God has set a bound[ary] to human activity in order to make legitimate liberty possible for all; without the 'bounds of God' liberty would degenerate into license, destroying the perpetrator himself along with the social fabric. This 'bound[ary]' is precisely what is called law which restrains human action within certain limits, forbidding some acts and enjoining others, and thus restraining the primitive liberty of man, so as to make it as beneficial as possible either to the individual or to society.' To quote Professor Santillana further: "whatever their form, these rules tend to the same end and have the same purpose, that is, the public weal (*maslahah*). Accordingly, law, divine in its origin, human in its subject-matter, has no other end but the welfare of man-even if this end may not at first sight be apparent, for God can do nothing which does not express the wisdom and mercy of which He is the supreme source."

(3) According to the Qur'an, law has a utilitarian basis. Its main purpose is to promote human values the realization of which creates inner and outer peace leading to God Who is also called Peace (*Salam*) in the Qur'an. In the few rules of laws given in the Qur'an, the fundamentals of jurisprudence are not repeated in every instance. But when once a general basis is formulated and

definitely given, it should be applied even in those instances in which the bare law is given without its rationale.

For instance, prohibiting alcoholic drinks and gambling, it says that in some cases they might benefit some individuals but they must be shunned in the interest of common weal, their injuries far outweighing their benefits. Law should not take account of individuals. It is the nature of law to have a universal character.

In amplifying the law given in the Qur'an or based on the *Sunnah*, to meet the demands of a growing and complex civilization, the Muslim jurists kept this principle in view. Imam Abu Hanifah, in his doctrine of *Istihsan* and Imam Malik, in his doctrine of *Masalih Mursalah* accepted it as a basis of fresh laws and rulings.

I propose to restrict this discussion to the question of the relation of law and love. All existence is governed by law and the law about every aspect of existence is as abiding as the phase of reality to which it applies. The unalterable laws of life and nature are designated in the Qur'an as *Sunnat-Allah* or [the] behavior of God and it is repeatedly said that you shall not find any change or alteration in this.

Understanding the abiding nature of eternal laws and moulding one's life according to them is defined as true religion. The second assertion in the Qur'an is also a universal proposition and that is that God essentially is Love-*Rahman* as Creative Love-and *Rahman* as Love exercised in Mercy. Certain attributes of God as given in the Qur'an are absolute and others are relative. It is only the quality of mercy that God has enjoined on Himself which means that it is eternally an essential part of His nature. But God's Love is not blind. It cannot be symbolised as a blind Cupid, throwing his darts at random. It is enlightened Love. In God, love and reason are identified. But reason is a law apprehending, law-making and law-abiding faculty. Therefore, life originating in love must find its manifestation in law. Human love, at a lower level of existence, tends to become lawless and human laws tend to become loveless. Love like war is supposed to justify

breaking of all laws of morality or decency. This is because in the limitations of human life neither love nor reason is perfect. In their imperfection they lose their identification with each other.

The essential reality is life and, therefore, law as well as love are to be judged by the criterion of life. The purpose of life is more life, higher life, better life, augmenting itself intensively as well as extensively. Life in its preservation and evolution, creates new laws out of its vital urge. Bergson, the protagonist of life against logic, makes the cosmic vital urge creative and evolutionary and in his book on two sources of morality and religion identifies it with love-which is the intuitive life of prophets and saints. For him the evolutionary urge is creative. It does not, however, create according to any previous laws and plants but laws and patterns emerge[d] out of it as secondary products.

A plant does not grow according to the laws of botany, but a science of botany becomes possible when life has created a plant. It is the same with language which does not develop out of a preconceived grammar, but grammatical patterns can be discovered in even the most primitive dialects. The Qur'an seems to be in accord with this viewpoint, giving priority to love although not neglecting the necessity and reality of law.

Note the sequence of God's attributes in the opening verses of the Qur'an about which we have already said something. The verses open with the conception of a beneficent and merciful God Who is the Lord and Sustainer of all the worlds that He creates. This perpetual providence or sustenance implies love for what is sustained, because one nourishes only that which one loves. Forgiveness is also implied in love because only love can be forgiving. But having emphasized these attributes, another attribute of God follows that He is the Lord of the Day of Judgment. He is the Supreme Judge Who first made the laws and then watches life to see whether it is following those laws.

Natural laws cannot be violated because material existence is not endowed with free will. The sun and the moon and the stars follow their prescribed courses as determined by the law inherent

in their nature, planted by the power that created them. Free-will emerges as a novel phenomenon during the course of an emergent evolution. Human life is lived at two levels in quite different dimensions. Free-will makes man a denizen of two worlds-the world of necessity and the world of freedom. Of the God's creation only man is to be judged. In the symbolic description in the Qur'an the rest of creation, when offered this risky gift, shuddered at the idea of its acceptance and were contented to exist in their eternal modes wherein no violation of law is possible.

The Qur'an also depicts spiritual beings as angels who are inherently incapable of defying the will of God. They perform their functions in absolute obedience. Rationality and free-will are two distinguishing characteristics of man, but his rationality can be blurred and his freedom misused, making him tyrannical and ignorant because of the improper use of these gifts.

In the QURANIC conception of man, he may rise above the angles or sink below the animals. To the 'ideal man' as depicted in the Qur'an, the angles have to submit if he realizes his ideal humanity and infinite possibilities, and entire 'nature' is a field for conquest through knowledge. But when he sinks, he sinks to a level [which is the] lowest of the law. His minutest thoughts, feelings and actions are weighed with precision in the sensitive balance [which has been] planted in his own nature in which, according to the words of the Qur'an, even atoms of deeds are weighed and his life is determined by the balance of good and evil.

God, Who creates out of Love and sustains out of Love, is also a judge of good and evil. Human life in its own interests has to be judged. Constantly sentences are pronounced-some are rewarding and the others are punishing. Not on account of vindictiveness, but because of the demands of life itself. Moral laws are real and God is the Legislator as well as the Judge. Love apart from law and reason is an abstraction, and 'law,' devoid of the foundation of love, would become a tyranny and a burden, hampering life instead of advancing it.

Reverting again to the opening prayer in the Qur'an, having asked man to recognize God as the Lord and Sustainer of all the worlds, of entire existence in all its variety and gradation, acknowledging Him primarily as Beneficence, Love and Mercy, creating life not as a Haphazard phenomenon but regulated by law, in this aspect, God manifests Himself as Legislator and Judge in the natural as well as the moral realm. It proceeds further to draw a corollary that only such a Being is exclusively worthy of worship and service, and assistance is to be sought ultimately from this Source. It directs man to pray, not for any particular goods or privileges, but to be guided in this Straight Path which combines love and law, following which the blessed ones have attained to Beatitude. Deviation from which has led others to stray and draw upon them[selves] the wrath which is the natural result of wrong thinking and wrongdoing.

We have already indicated the attitude of Jesus and Christianity towards Law. Jesus said that he had not come to destroy the law of Moses but to fulfil it. Jesus was not a legislating prophet. His main function and mission was to turn humanity towards the spirit more than the letter of the law. That is probably what he meant by fulfilling the law. Soon after him Christianity unburdened itself of the cumbersome corpus of almost the entire Jewish law. But when [the] Christian Church became powerful and Christianity became a State religion, laws were required both for religious and for secular life. The State legislated for its own necessities and the Church developed Canon Law. There was clash of jurisdictions which necessities and the Church developed Canon Law. There was clash of jurisdictions which has no disappeared after the conflict of centuries even in predominantly secular Christian States.

Islam did not believe in this dichotomy of jurisdictions. Life had to be regulated as an indivisible organic whole. Therefore it never developed a Church with a hierarchy of priests. Its system was neither theocratic nor secular in the Western Christian sense. In the Islamic system,

law originates in religion and every law is given either as a part of religion or has to justify itself on the basis of the fundamentals of Islam.

Love

Just as faith without works is dead (James 2:17), so, too, is it dead without love.

Love of one's neighbor

Muhammad affirmed: "You will not believe as long as you do not love one another" (Muslim 1:96) and "No man is a true believer unless he wants for his brother that which he wants for himself" (Bukhari 1:12). Concurring, Jesus said that to love your neighbor as yourself was like loving God (Matthew 23:37-39).

Although the word 'love' appears less frequently in the Qur'an than in the Bible, the notion of love permeates it. True love consists of right action towards one's neighbor, of taking care of others, of and helping those in need. In verse after verse, the Qur'an enjoins believers to be charitable to orphans, widows, travelers, and the poor. According to one hadith: "The best Islam is that you feed the hungry and spread peace among people you know and those you do not know." Similarly, Jesus tied Peter's loving him to taking care of his disciples (John 21:15-17), and John asserts that those who do not help a brother in need when they are able to do so do not have the love of God in them (1 John 3:17).

Love of God

Love of neighbors is a cornerstone of both Islam and Christianity, but love of God is the foundation. Such love is expressed in many ways, but let's look at four: prayer, repentance, contentment, and surrender to God.

People desire to be with and talk with those they love. Thus, Christians and Muslims who love God "pray continually" (1 Thessalonians 5:17) and "remember Allah much" (Qur'an 33:21). Prayer is a cleansing activity, partially because engaging in it allows people to see God's greatness and their own unworthiness. Such understanding brings repentance, which is essential

to receiving God's approval and Forgiveness (Qur'an 20:82; Muslim 2:1142; Matthew 4:17; Mark 1:15; Luke 5:32; 15:7).

Through cycles of prayer, repentance, and forgiveness, the believers' love of God grows. This gradually results in a weakening of the desires for worldly things, the cause of discontent. Becoming content with what God has allotted them, they "give thanks in all circumstances" (1 Thessalonians 5: 16-18), whether good or bad. Such believers are loved by people and by God, as one hadith says: "Desire not the world, and God will love you; and desire not what men have, and they will love you."

To be fully content means to be surrendered to Allah, a key concept in Islam. Indeed, the word "Islam" is understood to mean surrender, as it says in the Qur'an (3:19): "the religion before Allah is Islam. "Christianity believes the same, for as Jesus said, the greatest commandment is to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matthew 22:37). In other words, give your entire being to God.

Those who completely devote themselves to God are, naturally, are the closest to Him. Yet God is near all believers. Christians believe that God, in the form of the Holy Spirit, lives within them (1 Corinthians 6:19). For Islam, the indwelling concept is not prevalent, but God is nearer to the believer than his jugular veins (Qur'an 50:16) and says: "When my servants ask you about me, tell them I am near, I hear the prayer of the one who calls upon Me" (Qur'an 2:186).

Misunderstanding

As the Bible and the Qur'an agree on many things, why then do Muslims and Christians perceive each other so differently and so often misunderstand each other? Such a question, of course, deserves an in-depth, multi-faceted answer; however, we will look at just one of those facets: a difference of emphasis and vocabulary.

Muslims tend to emphasize right action, while Christians tend to focus on right belief. Conse-

quently, when Christians hear Muslims say that they are earning merit through their good deeds, they jump to the conclusion that Islam is a religion of works, not faith, and that Muslims are trying to earn their salvation, which no one can do. Also, Christians, disturbed by Muslims' emphasis on imitating the Prophet Muhammad, perceive Muslims as legalistic and fixed on externals rather than on such transforming internals like as love. They not realize that for Muslims, good deeds earn merit only if one has faith, and that it is love of the Prophet that leads them to follow his example.

In turn, when Muslim hear Christians talking about freedom and love, they believe that Christians can sin as much as they want and still enter Paradise, a perception by the immorality of not only ordinary people but also of the highly visible religious and political leaders in the West. Muslims fail to understand that the love of God prevents pious Christians from sinning. And there are other similar vocabulary problems resulting in misunderstanding and misperception that are exacerbated by the natural belief that theirs is the true and final religion. This misguided attitude causes both Muslims and Christians to exaggerate any potential difference to its worst extreme, and to forget that their own religions have the same concepts, albeit sometimes de-emphasized or expressed differently.

Conclusion

Although the disagreement on the nature of God and on the atonement of Jesus seems unresolvable, most differences are more a matter of emphasis rather than of disagreement.

Christianity stresses right belief and faith, but no Christian would deny that they should do good deeds and have good behavior. On the contrary, they "work" hard to please God because of their faith. Muslims, on the other hand, assuming that faith is necessary, prefer to emphasize the practical side of perfecting their faith via good works. Christians and Muslims agree that faith is necessary and that good works are important.

In reality, if one were simply to watch the outward behavior of pious Muslim and who was a Christian-for the pious of both religions who love their God and who have surrendered their lives to Him pray much, help the needy, and are kind towards their neighbors and their families.

Due to its shortness, this article will necessarily make broad generalizations that have many exceptions.

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Biodata

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