

When Christians speak of the holiness of God, we place Him in a unique category of moral perfection. In fact, morality itself, the difference between good/evil and the desire to seek good, is only possibly because God Himself is pure good. Thus He is not evil, and cannot participate in evil. Meanwhile the Qur'an says, "Allah does whatever he wants" (*al-Ibrahim* 14:27), and lauds Him for the title "*makr*" (*al-Imran* 3:54, *al-Anfal* 8:30) which means "deceiver." This means that Allah is able to participate in evil, and even plot evil, as He is so inclined. This is a diametric opposite to the biblical picture of holiness, which tells us God cannot be anything but high, pure, sovereign, and worthy.

### Just (judge, wrath)

A necessary consequence of God's holy nature is His justice, which God carries out in mercy and wrath. God's justice implies a moral standard of right-ness according to which one might be judged or forgiven. Without a moral standard in God Himself, the standard of just judgment is compromised. As a result, the sovereignty of Allah that we see in the Qur'an stands opposed to justice rather than supporting it. This may explain why the Qur'an describes Allah as *al-Khafidh*, the "abaser," or *al-Muthill*, the "one who leads astray" (*al-Nisa* 4:88, *al-Isra* 17:97). Justice in Islam becomes an arbitrary decision based upon an unknown standard. Consequently, Allah's creation is not important to Him. He could destroy it and recreate it in an instant without being troubled. Even a believer's becoming *kufir* (unbeliever) doesn't affect Him (*Al An'am* 6:149). As if this weren't enough to expose Allah as uncaring and unjust *Sura al-Sajdah* 32:13 says that Allah doesn't even desire for all people to believe in Him.

The Bible tells us that on the Day of Judgment God's moral purity will shine forth and destroy all sin in anger. This is known as His wrath. To some He might grant reprieve, which is an appeal to mercy. This is unlike Islam, where Allah's mercy or forgiveness can only be attained by abrogating law or passing over judgment without penalty. Both of these are unjust to God's holiness and justice. In contrast, Jesus Christ assures our forgiveness by His wrath-diverting sacrifice that appeases God's anger and purchases our mercy.

### Love (mercy, grace)

The Bible shows us that God not only created all things good, but that they will end good as well. Evil will be destroyed and sin judged. Such goodness is based in God's love. Although complete in Himself, God decided to create humanity as an act of love, an appreciation of other-ness. While humanity has turned away from the good life which God first offered, and as a result been changed with an evil inclination, God has never turned from His love or been changed. Indeed, He cannot, as the Bible tells us "God is Love" (1 Jn. 4:8). The great Algerian scholar Augustine adored God's love to such a degree as to say that the love of God is what binds His tri-unity in perfect one-ness. Not only is His

love complete in Himself as the Father loves the Son and the Son the Father and the Holy Spirit carrying the love between the two in perfect harmony, but God's love gives us certainty that His intentions toward us are for good and not for evil. God's love shows His self-giving for the benefit of others. Not only is love something that He does, but is a part of His very nature.

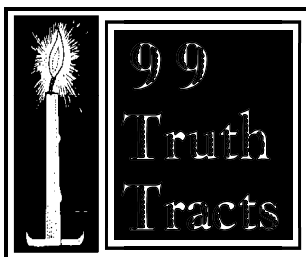
As love is focussed on bringing goodness to others, al-Ghazali wisely admits that Allah does not love as love shows lack and need. Before creation, who did Allah love if not Himself? How can the self-love of a monad be benevolent? As a result, al-Ghazali admits that Allah cannot love. While there are references in the Qur'an to Allah's mercy and loving-kindness, each shows **conditionality**. *Sura al-Maryam* 19:96 tells us "on those who believe and work deeds of righteousness, will Allah Most Gracious bestow Love." A conditional love is reward-based and not an appreciation of other-ness that desires to selflessly bring good and joy to others. The highest form of love is sacrificial or **unconditional** love.

The consequences of God's love influence every aspect of life. The way Christians relate to God is as a Father, one who tenderly cares for them. In contradistinction, Allah is an unknowable master, and the greatest honour a Muslim can attain is that of slave, or *abd-allah*. What we see in the Bible is that the fatherhood of God implies the brotherhood of man and imparts a calm assurance of His care. All peoples, languages, and cultures can come to Him to receive His love, and, in turn, extend that love to others. Fearfulness of Allah, a necessary consequence of His love-less-ness, leads to fear of others. Just as Allah's love is selfish, so, in turn, human love is selfish and fearful of others.

The God of the Bible's love is most clearly seen in the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ, who died on behalf of unworthy sinners in an act of pure loving-kindness. "Greater love has no one than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). All the delight of God's love is available because Jesus Christ rose from the dead. For all eternity God will pour out His perfect love, perfect joy, and perfect honour on those who stand before Him blameless.

For questions and comments please write to:

www.aboutabc.org  
info@aboutabc.org



This pamphlet was compiled by an interdenominational group of evangelical Christians concerned with Muslim-Christian dialogue.

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# What is God Like?

سُورَةُ الْإِخْلَاصِ  
بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ  
قُلْ هُوَ اللَّهُ أَحَدٌ (١) اللَّهُ الصَّمَدُ (٢) لَمْ يَلِدْ  
وَلَمْ يُولَدْ (٣) وَلَمْ يَكُنْ لَهُ كُفُوًا أَحَدٌ (٤)

### Al-Ikhlâs

In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful

Say: He is Allah, the One! (1) Allah, the eternally Besought of all! (2) He begetteth not nor was begotten. (3) And there is none comparable unto Him. (4)

Islam, like Christianity, embraces the God-given gift of reason to reflect upon God. A creature's greatest and most worthy object of reflection is its Creator. "The highest science, the loftiest speculation, the mightiest philosophy, which can engage the attention of a child of God, is the name, the nature, the person, the doings, and the existence of the great God." And even though Muslims and Christians devote their highest capacity to knowing the Creator, there still remains an appreciation that God's fullness could never be grasped.

Psalms 145 says, "Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise; his greatness no one can fathom" (v.3).

Likewise the Qur'an says, "There is none like unto Him" (*al-Ikhlās* 112:4)

For this reason, He cannot be fully known; merely reflected upon and adored. As a result, it must be understood from the outset that we are not saying God can be confined and evaluated scientifically. Far from it! Instead the reflections in this tract are based upon **divine revelation understood through human reason**. God has given us a mind and we are to use it for His honour.

What we know is that God, as a necessary being, is self-existent and independent. Muslims say that the Qur'an was sent as divine guidance; Christians say that Jesus was sent to lead us to God. Both Muslims and Christians, then, rely upon revelation to know God. In this tract we will look at what God has told us about Himself. Our primary interest in doing this is to pursue truth. Truth will always be externally consistent with history, philosophically consistent with itself, and practically able to be lived out.

### Muslim View of God

Muslims understand the Qur'an to be God's revelation sent to humankind supposedly said to lead people to the right way of living. As a result, Qur'anic exposition regarding the nature, character, and activities of Allah are at a minimum, while the greater emphasis is on the requirements of Muslim life. Even so, the Qur'an's few declarations of God emphasise His One-ness, a doctrine called *Tawhid*, which forms the foundation of Islamic theology. This doctrine is seen most clearly in Sura *al-Ikhlās* 112, traditionally said to be worth a third of the whole Qur'an. Zamakhshari says, "Ibn Abbas related that the Koreish said, 'O Mohammed, describe to us your Lord whom you invite us to worship,' then this Sura was revealed."

Say: He is Allah, The One and Only; Allah, the Eternal, Absolute; He begetteth not, nor is He begotten; and there is none like unto Him. (Sura 112)

At a root level, this Sura shows us God's absolute sovereignty and omnipotence. So much so that He can only be defined by negation, because of His transcendent superiority. We can only know what He is not. He is not bound by time; He needs nothing. He begetteth not because He is of an entirely superior constitution. Even the grammatical ending, "like unto Him," Baidawi tells us, is to emphasise an impassable separation between Allah and creation.

Such a high and distant transcendence leads undeniably to Allah's sovereignty (ruler-ship). Many of His 99 names speak of this sovereignty: *Al-Malik* (the King), *Al-Azziz* (the most powerful one), *Al-Kahar* (the dominant), *Al-Kabir* (the biggest), and so on. Additionally, such a high and distant transcendence leads undeniably to Allah's inscrutability (being unknowable). God's essence is higher than anything that He does, and His names separate from His core being. His will goes beyond reason and revelation. "There is nothing whatsoever like unto Him." (*al-Shūra* 42:11).

### Not a monad

The doctrine of *Tawhid* portrays Allah as a monad. A monad is defined as, "any fundamental singular metaphysical entity, esp. if autonomous." A monad is a simple and independent numerical singular. Important for the metaphysical property of simplicity, such philosophical nominalism (unity of will) ultimately leads to agnosticism (cannot know anything about God) as God's unity, masked in transcendent distance, forbids Him from being understood. He has no distinction or constitution. Allah alone understands Himself, and no one else can truly know anything about Him.

In Islam, Allah's names are not equal to His attributes. His names only help us to meditate on His high-ness. Allah's attributes can only be understood as those metaphysical qualities essential to the divine being. These are called *Isma-ul-Sifat*. Traditionally, these essential attributes are seven: Life (*hayat*), Knowledge ('*ilm*), Power (*qadr*), Will (*rada*), Hearing (*sama*), Seeing (*basr*), and Speech (*kalam*). What must be seen is that each of these essential attributes, except for life, when seen as pure actuality, is dependent upon creation. Knowledge of what? Power over what? Will for what? Hearing, seeing, speaking to whom? Even in Allah's core metaphysical makeup, being a monad makes Him dependent. A dependent God is a weak God. God must exist as a unity of persons.

### Christian View of God

The Bible unambiguously affirms that humanity can know God. Even though His "understanding is beyond measure" (Ps. 147:5), God has told us about Himself so that we can have a personal knowledge of Him, not just facts about Him. Such knowledge is the fruit of a living relationship that God has invited us to enjoy.

This is what the Lord says: "Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he **understands and knows me**, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight," declares the Lord. (Jer. 9:23-24)

"This is eternal life: **that they may know you**, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." (John 17:3)

Hebrews 1:1-3 tells us that Jesus was the clearest revelation of God for all humanity, the fullness of what God has told us about Himself. Because of this, we can speak in clearer terms regarding what God is like, as He has told us about Himself in the Bible, and because we can see what Jesus is like.

Traditionally, theologians have spoken about God in terms of necessary (metaphysical) attributes, moral attributes, essential characteristics and moral characteristics. All of these attributes and characteristics are complete in the divine being and dependent on nothing. This teaches us the fundamental importance of plurality in unity among God. Not only does the Bible teach us that God is One essence revealed in Three persons, a unity among three, or a tri-unity, but He is necessarily so. Love requires an object, so for God to be Love, He must love something/someone before creation. God loved Himself fully, and this was not a selfish love as He was able to extend perfect love to an other. Mercy, Justice, Will, Knowledge are all complete in God as He exercises the attributes perfectly and wholly in and among Himself. He is fully independent and needs no one, unlike Allah who is dependent on his creation for the exercise of his attributes. This completeness of God in tri-unity shows us that Creation was an act of Grace because of God's Love to be displayed, and an invitation for humanity to enjoy the fullness of life in God's presence. Furthermore, this tri-unity emphasises God's simultaneous transcendence and immanence, which is the basis of His self-revelation.

### Character of God (comparison)

Even though Muslim theologians, like al-Ghazali, will often reduce Allah to an unfeeling will and power, the Qur'an tells us instances of Allah's holiness, justice, and love. Here we will look at the Muslim and Christian understandings of holiness, justice, and love.

### Holy (sovereign, pure, unique, inscrutable)

The commentator al-Baidawi says, "Holy means the complete absence of anything that would make Him less than He is." Rather than teaching us about Allah, this definition is altogether a denial of definition, thus negating any valuable talk regarding God's holiness. Islamic commentaries use the word *tahir* (ceremonially clean) for God's holiness in contradistinction to His moral purity. We see at once that the Islamic definition of holiness is not grounded on a foundation of rightness or honour, but hedges in Allah to protect Him from being known.

On the contrary, when the prophet Isaiah had a vision of the throne room of God, he tells us that the angels worshipped God saying, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty" (Is. 6:3). God's holiness in the Bible means that He is separated from sin and set apart to seek His own honour. It further means that He is in a separate class of His own, unique and pure. Thus the angels adore God's highness, purity, sovereignty, and worth.