

## Christianity and Islam on Salvation: A Comparative Analysis of Sacred Texts on Atonement in Christianity and Intercession in Islam

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### ABSTRACT

The present paper attempts to compare the Christian and Islamic viewpoint on the doctrine of salvation. In both religions, human beings need to receive God's help to obtain salvation. For, sin (in Christianity) and ignorance (in Islam) are of humans' intrinsic attributes. In Christianity, God's help is studied in the atonement doctrine, and in Islamic texts, intercession has been introduced as one of the ways of receiving God's help. There are, however, some logical challenges in atonement and intercession doctrines that require clarifying explanations. In this paper, we have considered four systematized explanations for Christian atonement: "ransom" explanation, "the moral exemplar" explanation, "the satisfaction or debt cancelation" explanation, and "the generating divine mercy" explanation. Similar to each of them, an explanation for intercession could be extracted from Islamic texts. The most similarity between atonement and intercession doctrines occurs in the explanations in which both God's grace and human beings' willing and act are emphasized. Moreover, the first three explanations, with some modifications, can be merged to constitute a more general explanation for both atonement and intercession.

**Keywords:** Christianity, Islam, Salvation, Atonement, Intercession.

### INTRODUCTION

In all Abrahamic religions' sacred texts, there is the history (or story) of the sin of Adam and Eve. According to the sacred texts, Adam and Eve were tempted by a satanic scheme and ate from the prohibited tree.<sup>1</sup> This event caused God to cast Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden; it was the beginning of mankind's sins. From that point on, Satan has been allowed to delude mankind continuously, taking them away from God's orders, good deeds, and a spiritual life. Disobedience draws human beings into eternal punishment and suffering. But, God loves his creatures and he would not like to see humans' eternal punishment. In the Bible, God has been introduced as merciful and beneficent (Romans 9:16) and, all the Qur'anic sections (except one) begin with the verse "In the name

of God, the most compassionate and the most merciful."

Here, believers recognize a paradoxical problem. On the one hand, human beings (in Christianity), or at least some of them (in Islam), are really deserving of the eternal punishment and they cannot save themselves. On the other hand, the merciful God does not want to punish them. In other words, the eternal punishment and absolute Divine Grace are rationally contradictive.

On this basis, while resolving the paradox of a lover-punisher God, religions also have to show ways toward redemption or salvation, and a complete return back to God for their followers.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The commentators of the sacred texts have different explanations of the "prohibited tree." In exoteric interpretations, it could be an apple tree or wheat. But some of the commentators have an esoteric interpretation such that the tree is understood as the tree of knowing good and evil. The Bible clearly mentions this about the tree. See (Genesis 3:5).

<sup>2</sup>Both Islam and Christianity have based the salvation doctrine upon Satan's role since the beginning of the creation of mankind. The points of emphasis, however, are slightly different. In Christianity the emphasis is on Original Sin (the Satan's role in the heavenly garden) and the salvation doctrine is formed on this basis. In contrast, Islamic salvation insists on the release from Satan's guiles in everyday life. It would be helpful if we use the term "salvation" in Christian context, and the term

They have to show how human beings can be salvaged from damnation in spite of their contaminated souls.

For this purpose, each of the religions has a doctrine containing some theoretical propositions to describe the nature of sin and to explain the ways of redemption and salvation. In addition, these religions have some practical instructions to reach these goals. Also, there are some different approaches to the salvation doctrine not only between different religions, but also among each religion's scholars. Disregarding these variations, however, it is clearly evident that for most Abrahamic religions salvation is the most important doctrine. Therefore, many thinkers have introduced salvation as the ultimate goal of revelation.

Among the religions, Christianity and Islam have been selected by the writer for a comparative analysis, focusing on the salvation doctrine. This analysis is intended to create an open dialogue between Islam and Christianity. Both religions have many conceptual similarities, but there are naturally differences between them. We will try to analyze the similarities and differences to reach a common understanding of salvation.<sup>3</sup> Toward this goal, we have to discuss Original Sin from the Islamic and Christian perspectives.<sup>4</sup> After that, we will

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“redemption” in Islamic context, to distinguish between these two approaches. But, there is no problem when we apply the term “salvation” to describe the Islamic doctrine for the sake of brevity.

<sup>3</sup> We must mention before beginning the article that our perspective is an extroverted one and the writer is not -or at least is trying not to be- limited by personal beliefs. Reliable documents are the only acceptable references. Moreover, we are taking Christianity and Islam as they have come to be known, according to documents. We are considering the live and lived (current and historical) Islam and Christianity, as well as the Muslims' and Christians' understandings of these religions.

<sup>4</sup> The term “Original Sin” is not used in Islamic texts. Islamic scholars insist that Original Sin, as it is explained by Christianity, is not acceptable in Islam. In the present paper, however, we use this term in relation to the Adam and Eve story, which is frequently mentioned by the Qur'an. Therefore, when we say “Original Sin in Islam,” we do not mean that Islam accepts this doctrine to the degree that Christianity does.

begin analyzing the salvation doctrine in these religions.

### **THE QUR'AN AND BIBLE ON ORIGINAL SIN**

Insofar as the exterior of verses is concerned, the main content of the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden is the same in the Qur'an and the Bible, even in some particular details. There are, of course, some differences between the Biblical and Qur'anic versions in this issue. The Bible, for instance, has alluded to Eve's creation (Genesis 2:21), while the Qur'an has no verses about the creation of Eve. Also, according to the Bible, the Satanic Snake first deluded Eve to eat from the tree (Genesis 3:3-6) while, according to the Qur'an, Satan deluded both Adam and Eve to eat (Qur'an 2:36).

Moreover, there are other important differences between the Qur'an and Bible. According to the Qur'an, after eating of the tree, God taught them some “words” that could renew their relationship with God. They did apologize and God accepted their repentance. For, God is intrinsically the receptor of repentances and the merciful (Qur'an 2:37). But, Adam and Eve's exile from heaven was the absolute Divine volition; they and their children (mankind) had to inhabit the earth. The Qur'an, however, clarifies that if the humans follow the prophets, they will not be sorrowful and dreaded (Qur'an 2:38). The Qur'an says nothing about the tree of life as the motive of Man's deportation. According to the Bible, however, God sent Adam and Eve out of the Garden after they ate from the tree, because they knew good and evil. As a result, God did not want them to eat from the tree of life, too (Genesis 3:22).

In the Islamic approach, with God's acceptance of Adam and Eve's repentance, it seems that the nature of Man is not unavoidably corrupt. Satan, however, as well as in the Christian version, has been allowed to persuade Man to sin forever, except for those who have seriously purified themselves for God with the help of God. The Qur'an says that Satan has sworn to tempt mankind, and to lead him into hell (Qur'an 38: 82-83). But in Christianity, it is supposed that sin is a natural attribute of Man, or, according to Aquinas, we are born in bondage to Satan.<sup>5</sup> Everyone is born with sin which is a part of the human being. Also, sin has naturally enmeshed human beings in death. Sin and death have entered into mankind's life by Adam and Eve's

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<sup>5</sup> Aquinas, III 48, 4.

sin (Romans 5:12). But, one who believes in Christ, and consequently would be in Christ (Ephesians 1:3), has been rendered a new creature (2Corinthians 5:17).

Although the Islamic version of original sin rejects the sinful nature of the human being, the Qur'an introduces some inborn blameworthy adjectives for mankind, which are the causes of sin, such as ignorant (devoid of knowledge) (Qur'an 33:72). Therefore, we can understand that although the nature of humans is not sinful, human beings have some attributes and natural tendencies that contribute to their sinful nature. For, according to the Qur'anic verses (Qur'an 12:89, 39:64) and Prophetic sayings, inborn blameworthy qualities, especially ignorance, are the basic causes of sin. Also, the Qur'an represents the human being as an oppressor (Qur'an 33:72), while damning the oppressors and threatening them with eternal punishment (Qur'an 11:18). Moreover, there are Prophetic sayings that insist on the sinfulness of mankind, such as the effect of original sin in the Christian context. For example, he said: "All Adam's children (mankind) are sinners, and the best sinner is he who repents"<sup>6</sup>(1).

Therefore, from both the Islamic and Christian perspectives, the human being is naturally contaminated by ignorance, oppressiveness, sins and death. Human beings must be subjected to the divine damnation, wrath, and severe punishment forever (John 3:36). So, mankind needs to be saved from eternal punishment, and religions must have a doctrine which describes conditions and aspects of salvation.

### **COMMON NECESSARY FACTORS FOR SALVATION**

Both Islam and Christianity insist that the most important factor for saving mankind is Divine Grace. Indeed, without this factor, salvation is impossible. So, we can call Divine Grace the central necessary factor for saving mankind. The Bible mentions that our good deeds are like filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6). They are not sufficient, and cannot help us obtain salvation. Even following the rules of God's law will not work without the mercy of God (Galatian 2:15-16). Divine Grace is the main factor for ascertaining the salvation of mankind (Ephesians 2:8-9). Similar to the Bible, the Qur'an insists on the

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<sup>6</sup>Please note that the books of Bukhari, Ibn-e-Majeh and Hindi are referenced according to classical numbering of hadiths.

mercy of God to save mankind. This meaning is frequently repeated by the Qur'an (Qur'an 7:23, 12:53, 24:14).

After Divine Grace, "faith"<sup>7</sup> is a necessary factor for salvation in both Islam and Christianity. Although Divine Grace includes all creatures, only the faithful people could obtain the salvation and be blessed by the mercy of God. In other words, "faith" is itself the most important Divine Grace given to people by God. However, being faithful requires humans' willingness. That is why, in both the Qur'an and Bible, there are many verses that command faith. This means that faith could be obtained by Man's free will; otherwise, God's command to faith does not make sense. In the Bible, faith in Christ is introduced as an "act by will" which is a necessary factor for obtaining salvation (John 3:18, Act 16:31). The Qur'an also commands a belief and faith in order to obtain redemption. According to the Qur'an, only saying "I believe" is not sufficient to save one from loss. The faith must be in the believer's heart (Qur'an 4:136).

The "resurrection" and "afterlife" are further subjects that must be believed by people to obtain salvation. For Muslims, believing in the resurrection and afterlife are the principles of Islam, a thought commonly shared by the Bible:

But as touching the resurrection of the dead, have ye not read that which was spoken unto you by God, saying, I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living (Mathew 22:31-32).

Believing in the Christ is also one of the common necessary factors for salvation in Islam and Christianity. The Qur'an expresses that Christ is God's divine revelation; he was born from the Virgin Mary as the Word of God:"[And mention, O Muhammad] when the angels said, O Mary, God gives you good tidings of a Word from Him, whose name is the Messiah Jesus, the son of Mary" (Qur'an 3:45).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Translators and commentators sometimes apply the word "faith" and sometimes "belief." But, there is a slight difference between these two words. In the present paper "faith" and "belief" have the same usage.

<sup>8</sup> This is true not only about Jesus Christ, but also about the other prophets which are named and described by the Qur'an, such as Moses.

On this basis, anyone who does not believe in Christ as the Word of God does not believe in the Qur'an. The Qur'an strictly says that Muslims must confirm the previous revealed holy books in addition to believing in God and the Last Day (Qur'an 2:3-5). Although some Muslims and Christians have differing interpretations of Christ's nature, they share the common belief in Christ as the Word of God in the Gospel and Qur'an.

The other common necessary factor is doing righteous deeds. Though this matter has been the subject of many debates in Christianity, we can understand two main approaches to this issue. One of them says that salvation has occurred before the doing of good deeds. In this approach, doing righteous deeds is a sign of salvation, not a necessary factor to be salvaged (Philippians 2:12-13). According to this understanding, a human being is like a tree whose fruits are the signs of being alive, and doing righteous deeds is the sign of faithful living, not vice versa (2). The second approach is that doing righteous deeds is a necessary factor for obtaining salvation. Indeed, there is a dialectic relationship between faith and doing righteous deeds. Obtaining salvation requires righteous deeds, and they are signs of coming close to grasping salvation. But, in this case, all works must be done based on faith, otherwise doing righteous deeds could not be helpful for obtaining salvation.<sup>9</sup>

The Quranic view is close to the second approach in Christianity. Doing righteous and good deeds is as important as faith for obtaining salvation (Qur'an 22:77). Of course, righteous deeds include worship and prayer, in addition to helping others and having good moral behavior. The Qur'an frequently mentions this issue (Qur'an 103:1-3).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> It seems that most of Protestants believe in the first approach. The term "sola fide," which is one of the central concepts in Protestantism, shows this understanding. They base this understanding on the other basic concept, "sola scriptura," and cite some verses, such as Philippians 2:12-13.

<sup>10</sup> It is important to note that redemption in the Qur'an is not limited to Muslims. If anyone has the necessary factors, he/she may obtain salvation and be released from punishment: "Verily! Those who believe and those who are Jews and Christians, and Sabians, whoever believes in God and the Last Day and does righteous deeds shall have their reward with their Lord, on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve" (Qur'an 2: 62).

The above items are common necessary factors in Christianity and Islam; without them salvation is impossible.<sup>11</sup> These factors, however, are not sufficient for mankind to obtain salvation; mankind needs God's help. Christianity's doctrine of "atonement" and Islam's doctrine of "intercession" are introduced as this help. These doctrines are focused on by the present paper in detail to show how the human being could be saved from eternal punishment in Islam and Christianity.

### **ATONEMENT AND INTERCESSION**

The doctrine of atonement has been generally accepted by the various branches of Christianity with a few interpretational differences. According to these interpretations, on the one hand, all human beings are sinful (Romans 3:10-12, 23), and Man's sin is so enormous that nobody could remove the contaminations of sin by his/her own good deeds (Isaiah 64:6; Romans 9:16). Human beings have to be deservedly punished, and death is mankind's destiny (Ephesians 2:1). On the other hand, the merciful God did not want to punish Man, and wanted to give human beings a new life (1 Timothy 2:4). Therefore, God incarnated the Son of God in the human form (Romans 1:4). He endured many passions, and was crucified to take away Man's sin, as well as to save mankind from an eternal punishment (1 Peter 1:18-19). Indeed, he atoned for all mankind's sins, and opened the door of salvation by his death and suffering. So, since the emergence of Christ as the redeemer in human history, it has been possible for all human beings to wash their sins by the Christ's blood.

Also in Islam, there is the doctrine of "intercession" (*Shifa'ah*) that introduces the way of salvation. The doctrine of intercession is basically accepted by most Islamic scholars from both Shi'a and Sunni groups. But, there are some differences between these two groups regarding the details of intercession. This doctrine says that most human beings, which are definitely sinners, cannot save themselves on Doomsday, when God will give his final judgment. However, God, because of His great Grace, will allow intercessors to ask forgiveness for sinners. Indeed, intercession is, at first, the

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<sup>11</sup> Of course, each religion has its specific factors and conditions for obtaining salvation. But, in this paper we are emphasizing common factors for Islam and Christianity, and we avoid discussing the specific factors.

act of God and then the act of intercessors. The intercession is permitted by God because He is beneficent and all-merciful. On the one hand, He wants to forgive the sinners, but they are not in a position to obtain God's forgiveness. On the other hand, if God cleans the sins and forgives the sinners for no reason, God's Justice would be undermined. But, the intercessors are in a position to pray and beg for forgiveness on the sinners' behalf. After their intercession, the cleansing of sins does not conflict with God's Justice.

According to the Qur'anic verses and hadiths (the Prophet's sayings), prophets (3), believers (4), angels (5), and holy things like the Qur'an (6), which are in close proximity to divinity, could be the intercessors for sinners on that Day. For Muslims, the Prophet Muhammad is considered the major intercessor (7); the Prophet himself affirms this: "there is a prayer for each prophet, and my prayer in the Doomsday would be the intercession for my followers" (8).

Additionally, Shi'ism has a special group of intercessors that hold a supreme spiritual position. Shia believes that there are the completely perfect men (*Imams*) who are impeccable, and believers can implore them for their help.<sup>12</sup> Imams can intercede for believers, with God's authorization, as can the Prophet Muhammad. Indeed, the intercessors are intermediaries between sinners and God. They can pray for sinners and ask God's forgiveness of them, which will cause the sin of sinners to be washed away and save them from punishment. But, the Qur'an insists that they cannot be intercessors unless God permits them (Qur'an 2:255; 34:23; 10:3).

### **THE VARIOUS EXPLANATIONS FOR ATONEMENT AND INTERCESSION**

Despite the fact that Christian thinkers are unanimous about atonement, there are various understandings and versions of this doctrine that have appeared throughout the history of

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<sup>12</sup> Nowadays, there are three main branches of Shia which are called Zaydism, Ismailism, and Twelver. The main differences between them are the number of Imams and the name of the last Imam. All of them, however, believe that in addition to the Imams and the Prophet Muhammad, the daughter of the Prophet, Fatimah, is impeccable too. She is the mother of second and third Imams, and other Imams are her grandchildren. One exception is Imam Ali, who is her husband. According to Shia's beliefs, she holds a higher station with God than Imams.

Christianity. In the following, we will mention selected explanations of atonement and will discuss the related Islamic theories with Christian versions. Of course, these versions of atonement are related to each other and they have the same structure, but their details have some differences that cause different understandings of the atonement doctrine. Similarly, in Islam, there is a unit structure of intercession; however, different details cause different versions.

#### **The Ransom Explanation**

One of the oldest theories of atonement is the Ransom explanation, which has been attributed to the first Apostolic Fathers, such as Origen and Gregory of Nyssa. According to this explanation, and on the basis of a mythical belief, God and Satan had a competition to grab the human's soul, and human's sin caused Satan to occupy the human's soul. But, God loved mankind and wanted to release human beings from Satan's grasp. Therefore, God paid the price of human's freedom to Satan with the death of Christ (9). It seems that roots of this theory are in a Gnostic view, which shows dual powers in the world: God and Evil.

In the Islamic texts also, there are some verses and hadiths that introduce a viewpoint similar to the Gnostic approach. This viewpoint assumes a competition between God and Satan to be worshipped by mankind:

Did I not enjoin upon you, O children of Adam, that you not worship Satan - [for] indeed, he is to you a clear enemy - And that you worship [only] Me? This is a straight path (Qur'an 36:60-61).

So, God sent the prophets, especially the Prophet Muhammad, toward people to notify them of what they must do. In other words, the Prophet Muhammad endured many hardships to tell the people that they must worship God, not Satan. It is important to mention that the central concept for human's misery in Islam, instead of sin, is ignorance. Therefore, in Islam, the main Prophet's role is not to eliminate the sins but to notify human beings that Satan is a clear enemy for them. Indeed, the Prophet's passion is a ransom that is paid for human's notification and release from worshipping Satan, and it is an intercession to save the people from an eternal punishment. But it is clear that only knowing is not sufficient to obtain salvation. Willingness and doing righteous deeds are the other factors

that can save one from eternal punishment. So, the related Islamic version of the ransom explanation could be called “ransom for ignorance” instead of “ransom for sins.” Of course, in addition to ransom for ignorance, the passion of Prophet Muhammad and the other intercessors makes them able to pray for forgiving sinners, who are in Satan’s trap. But, the intercessors cannot release sinners from Satan’s trap; they can only pray and ask the help of God.

In the Christian context, Aquinas’s theory could be considered an advanced version of the Ransom explanation, which is similar to the Islamic version of it, especially regarding Satan and religious rituals. Aquinas insists that the humans’ sin causes the authority of Satan over human beings. But, he also insists that this is not a competition between God and Satan. In Aquinas’s theory, Satan is God’s servant and God allowed him to delude mankind.<sup>13</sup> On this basis, Christ’s atonement is the way of releasing mankind from Satan’s evil. This means that, with Christ’s atonement, the authority of Satan would be ineffective or be minimized. This shows that Aquinas’s theory of atonement is similar to the intercession doctrine in Islamic context. This is because the main role of the Prophet Muhammad, and other intercessors, is informing people of Satan’s traps (Qur’an 88:21). This informing—which could be in several ways such as speech (Qur’an 5:67), sufferings (Qur’an 11:112), and death—causes the decrease in Satan’s authority in humans’ lives. Especially, when Aquinas emphasizes humans’ willingness to obtain salvation,<sup>14</sup> this similarity is better shown. He even insists that the stain of sin does not automatically vanish when the act of sin ends. According to Aquinas:

Only when the will, moved by grace, reorients itself toward God by a movement contrary to its previous sinful movement does the soul come back into the light of reason and the divine light. Then, the stain is removed and the soul regains its comeliness (10).

From a Christian perspective, considering both God’s grace and free will for obtaining salvation is one of the strengths of Aquinas’s theory (11).

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<sup>13</sup> This understanding is similar to the Qur’anic verses, considering that in the Qur’an, God cursed Satan and exiled him out of heaven, but let him delude mankind (Qur’an 15:36-38).

<sup>14</sup> Aquinas, I-II 86:1-2.

In the Islamic context, similarly, ending the act of sin is not sufficient; people have to will, move and do good deeds to remove the stain of sin, as the Qur’an says: “Indeed, good deeds remove [the effect of] sins” (Qur’an 11:114). And, the Prophet Muhammad said: “A repentant sinner, is the same as one who has never sinned” (12).

Aquinas believed that religious rituals, such as baptism, prepare human beings to obtain salvation (13). In other words, religious rituals are necessary factors and without them, salvation is impossible. In Islam, similarly, religious rituals, such as prayer, fasting, ablution and charity are legislated for nearness to God and as preparation to obtain salvation. The Qur’an, for instance, introduces charity as a necessary factor to attain a spiritual life (Qur’an 3:92). In Shi’a, especially, there are many hadiths of Imams that introduce rituals as necessary factors for the benefit of Imams’ intercession. For instance, the sixth Imam said: “He who does not care of prayer, will never obtain our intercession” (14).

It seems that Aquinas’s interpretation of ransom theory and its corresponding Islamic version are reasonable and compatible with, respectively, Christian and Islamic sacred texts. There are, however, some challenges in these interpretations. For example, emphasizing on specific religious rituals in both versions makes the population of saved people too limited. It must be clarified what will happen for the people who do not know about particular religious rituals, but who do good deeds and want to be saved.

### **The Moral Exemplar Explanation**

This explanation is founded by Peter Abelard and insists on mankind’s need for a moral exemplar to find salvation’s way. According to Abelard, moral evolution and reformation of human beings is not possible, unless they follow a perfect moral exemplar, who is Christ. He was incarnated as a human to be a perfect exemplar in order to prepare mankind for a spiritual life and a friendship with God. So, in this theory, Christ’s atonement does not directly wash away mankind’s sin. But, this explanation introduces a moral exemplar and reveals the way of salvation to mankind. After that, following Christ, human beings must attempt to avoid sins and Satan’s temptations as Christ did. In this way, mankind could benefit from Christ’s death and his blood, because it will allow them to obtain a spiritual

life and salvation (15). This explanation, of course, is based on the Bible (1 Peter 2:21-23).

However, we can understand the moral exemplar theory in two ways. The first understanding is that Abelard's theory is, indeed, a theory on the prevention of sin and here the role of Christ is passive; this version has focused only on avoiding voluntary sins and Christ's death does not do anything special for sinners. In this understanding, for instance, the moral exemplar version says nothing about salvation from Original Sin, which is present in the human race as an involuntary sin. Because of this, the first understanding of Abelard's explanation cannot satisfy a Christian belief system. For, in a Christian context, the atonement doctrine regards the direct removal of sins through Christ's blood and death (1 Peter 2:24).

The second understanding is that followers of the moral exemplar (Christ) can be like him (Romans 8:29); they try to do no voluntary sin. This similarity causes mankind to benefit from Christ's blood and death. In this understanding, Christ's relationship with his followers is not passive. When the followers become like him, he actively saves them by his blood and death even from involuntary sins. In other words, only the followers of Christ can benefit from Christ's blood. This understanding is closest to the Christian tradition, but it is not as close to Abelard's writings.

The moral exemplar theory is also present in the Islamic context with similar details. Generally, in the Islamic approach, the moral exemplar theory is emphasized, because, in Islam, intercession and obtaining salvation are based on humans' willingness and action. Following a moral exemplar is an opportunity for preparing to benefit from his intercession. According to the Qur'an, the Prophet Muhammad is a perfect moral exemplar, and people can obtain redemption, God's love, and the spiritual life by following him (Qur'an 33:21; 3:31). The two mentioned interpretations of Abelard's opinion appear here once again. The first understanding is that the Prophet Muhammad is only a passive pattern for Muslims that must be followed. People, considering him as a moral exemplar, can recognize good deeds and can find the way of redemption. He is only a teacher and does not have another role in the redemption doctrine; as he said about his role: "I have been sent as a

teacher," (16) and, "I have been sent to perfect the good moral rules" (17). The second understanding, however, is that the Prophet Muhammad is an active intercessor; being a moral exemplar provides him with a transcendental position to pray for sinners. He is, on the one hand, an exemplar that shows redemption's way with his words and deeds. On the other hand, he intercedes for sinners and prays for them until God forgives them. With this dual role, he prepares people to benefit from his intercession and obtain redemption.

Briefly, the second understanding of the moral exemplar explanation in both Christianity and Islam could be an effective interpretation of atonement and intercession. In this understanding, the active roles of Jesus Christ, the prophet Muhammad, and their followers are clearly determined. Moreover, this understanding is reasonably compatible with Christian and Islamic sacred texts.

### **The "Satisfaction or Debt Cancellation" Explanation**

This theory has been developed by Anselm, and, nowadays, is the prevailing point of view surrounding atonement. In this theory, Anselm emphasizes that sins cause mankind's debt to God, because God has the right to be worshiped and be obeyed. Indeed, humans' sin is an insult to God, and it is necessary that God punish mankind. Since God is infinite, human's sin as an insult to God has infinite consequences. On this basis, forgiving humans was impossible, unless God paid for mankind's sin himself with the passion of Christ. Christ was the only one who obeyed God perfectly. He should never have been punished and put to death. But, he accepted the death to prove his obedience to God. So, God was extremely satisfied with him and wanted to give him a worthy reward. Christ, however, wanted God's forgiveness for mankind as his reward, and God accepted Christ's request (18).

In the Islamic context, there also exists the paradigm of "the rights of God." In many Qur'anic verses, worshiping God and associating nothing with Him are considered as the rights of God (Qur'an 4:36, 9:3, 98:5). Also, in the Prophet's sayings, there are many hadiths that declare the rights of God. For instance, he said to Ma'az (one of his Companions):

O Ma'az, do you know what the rights of God are? Ma'az said: God and His messenger know

that. [The Prophet Muhammad] said: it is that His creatures worship only God and associate nothing with Him (19).

According to this hadith, he/she who worships and obeys only God would be saved from punishment because he/she has respected the rights of God. But, obedience to Satan (or anything except God) is violating the rights of God, and God must punish the worshiper of Satan. On the other hand, the Qur'an insists that most people do not know the right, do not thank God, take something else (like Satan) besides God, and are perverted (Qur'an 21:24, 7:10, 34:13). Therefore, though God loves his creatures, most people must be punished by God. Here, the role of intercession appears. The Prophet Muhammad and other intercessors, who have perfectly obeyed God and endured passions for God, could intercede for creatures. They would ask God's forgiveness for people, and God would accept their intercession because of their position.

Generally, it is obvious that there is similar content for Anselm's opinion and the paradigm of the rights of God in Islam. However, there are some differences between these two viewpoints on sins and God's rights. For example, in Anselm's opinion, forgiving all sins is possible with Christ's atonement, because all sins are insulting God's rights. But, in Islam, there are specific sins that not only insult God's rights, but also people's rights. Therefore, they cannot be removed by intercession. In this case, only the people whose rights have been insulted are able to forgive the sinner. God will not remove this kind of sin, unless the damaged people forgive the sinner, even if the Prophet Muhammad would intercede for the sinner.

In the Christian context, the satisfaction explanation has been developed by Richard Swinburne as "the penance explanation." Removing humans' sins, Swinburne believes, has four main steps: apology, repentance, reparation, and penance (20). A fable could help us clarify these steps: Suppose, following a quarrel, you became angry and broke the window of your friend's house. Now, you are regretful and want to improve your relationship with him. The first step is apology. Then, you have to show your repentance and tell him, "I am really sorry," and it is not just an oral apology. In the third step, you must attempt to repay the broken window. You can change the window or pay for the damages. But, it is

probably not sufficient and he may not forgive you; therefore, you try for penance. This would be achieved by sending flowers every day for him, buying a great gift, or playing nice music every day in front of the broken window with a portable device. You can, however, suppose a circumstance where you have killed a person. In this situation, you may not be able to find a worthy reparation and penance. You could just do the two first steps: apologize and show your repentance. But, reparation and penance are out of your ability; for these steps, you need help for forgiveness.

According to Swinburne, the situation of mankind in the world is like the latter situation. Humans' sins are so immense that they could not possibly pay reparation to God themselves. Also, human beings cannot find a way to do penance to obtain God's forgiveness. Mankind needed help for salvation and Christ gave readily. He endured many passions through his reparation and penance to God, in the hope that God would forgive mankind's sins.

What is important is that, in Swinburne's theory, the first two steps are humans' obligation. If anyone does not apologize and does not show his/her repentance, Christ's payment of reparation and penance for his/her sins does not have meaning. In other words, human beings must do whatever they can for their salvation despite knowing that their deeds are not sufficient. Only in this way can they benefit from Christ's atonement for reparation and penance of their sins.

In Islam, the last section of Swinburne's theory is very important. As we mentioned before, if anyone wants to obtain intercession from the Prophet Muhammad and other intercessors, he/she must attempt to apologize to God and attempt to repent. The intercession does not include those who have not apologized to God and do not repent. The Qur'an commands repentance for redemption, and emphasizes that even if you seriously and sincerely repent, *maybe* you can obtain redemption (Qur'an 66:8). Considering that the first two steps must be taken by humans themselves, mankind needs further help, and this comes in the form of intercessors.

However, it seems that there are some differences between Swinburne's opinion and the version that can be extracted from Islamic texts. For example, in the Islamic version of debt cancelation theory, the third step could be



achieved by the sinner himself. Even according to Islamic texts, some religious laws have been legislated along these lines.<sup>15</sup> Also, believers' sufferings in this world are the reparations that they pay for removing their sins, as the prophet Muhammad said: "Sufferings and grief are believers' reparations and remove believers' sins" (21). Anyway, the fourth step, penance, cannot be done by believers themselves; they need the help of intercessors or God's direct forgiving in this step. Briefly, the structure of Swinburne's explanation is present in Islam and it could be developed in the Islamic context to form an intercession theory with the required changes.

### **The "Generating Divine Mercy" Explanation**

This theory is offered by Philip Quinn. Quinn changes the traditional approach to atonement and criticizes previous theories, especially that of Aquinas. He represents the theory of competition between God and Satan as inefficient. Quinn says that God could not have allowed Satan to delude and punish human beings, because this would mean that God betrays humans. He also believes that the idea of ransom and cancelation of debt are temporary ideas and related to the time where these issues were more pervasive in societies. Indeed, the old versions of atonement are effected by cultural and historical conditions. In years past, cash payment for sins, and even, punishing an innocent person instead of the sinner was a common practice. For example, if a daughter sinned it was not immoral for her mother to be punished when they could not pay their debt in cash. In this context, the doctrine of atonement was interpreted by Christian scholars as a ransom or debt cancelation. Nowadays, however, to punish a human being instead of another is an immoral deed and our moral intuition cannot accept this punishment. According to Quinn, we have to find a modern explanation for the doctrine of atonement, observing the main content of the Bible's verses.

Instead, Quinn believes that the death of Christ generates Divine mercy. He explains his idea in a fable:

Suppose a great magnate makes his two sons stewards of the two finest farms on his estate.

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<sup>15</sup> For example, one of the functions of the law of blood price and retaliation (*Ghesas*) in Islam, is sin's reparation.

The elder son irresponsibly neglects and thus ruins his farm, but the younger son conscientiously makes his own farm flourish. As a result of his negligence, the elder son has come to deserve punishment at the hands of his father. It would be severe but just for the father to disinherit him if he does not restore the ruined farm to prosperity. Unfortunately, the elder son is not a good enough farmer to accomplish this task, even though he could have prevented the ruin of the farm if he had tried.

Then the younger son wonderfully intervenes. Moved by love for his brother as well as by devotion to their father and the welfare of his estate, the younger son undertakes to restore the farm his brother has ruined. This new undertaking requires tremendous sacrifice from him: he now has to maintain one farm and rehabilitate another. But, the sacrifices so work upon the father's heart that he is persuaded to be merciful rather than severe toward his elder son. He forgives his elder son for the damage he has done to the estate and does not disinherit him, even though the elder son has not himself repaid the damage (22).

Quinn analogizes mankind to the elder son who cannot save his humanity (the estate), and the younger son to Christ who endured many passions to save mankind (his brother) from God's punishment by generating the mercy of God (the father). Indeed, Quinn believes, the doctrine of atonement does not express any payment to God. This conjecture stems from God's self-sufficiency; he does not need to be paid to forgive mankind. Atonement is, in fact, generating the mercy of God through the suffering and death of Christ.

The theory of Quinn, however, could not satisfy most Christian thinkers (23). This is because of the authority Quinn gives to moral intuitions. Moreover, in Quinn's theory, a devaluation of the role of the Holy Bible and Christian tradition is observed. More importantly, this explanation entails some fundamental changes in Christian beliefs. For example, the idea of "generating Divine mercy" entails changing in God, which is not acceptable at all. For, God is absolutely perfect and no changing can be considered in God's essence; changes occur only in imperfect beings, such as humans.

In the Islamic context, similarly, changing in God's essence is impossible. But, there exist Qur'anic verses that refer to those human deeds that, apparently, generate the mercy and love of

God. One of these good deeds is following the Prophet Muhammad: “Say, [O Muhammad], if you should love God, then follow me, [so] God will love you and forgive you your sins. And God is Forgiving and Merciful” (Qur’an 3:31). And, one of them is self-sacrifice; giving one’s life in order to generate the pleasure of God: “And of the people is he who gives his life, seeking the pleasure of God and the approval of Him. And God is kind to [His] servants” (Qur’an 2:207).

However, this is not in fact a change in God’s essence, but this is a consequence of following the Prophet Muhammad and people’s self-sacrificing. In other words, God is saying that if one follows the Prophet Muhammad and sacrifices oneself for the other people, God would forgive his sins, and if not, he is far from God’s forgiveness. On this basis, intercessors do not generate the love and pleasure of God by sacrificing themselves; when God sees them sacrificing and enduring sufferings, He accepts the intercessors’ prayers and requests, and forgives sinners.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, we can say Quinn’s explanation has no corresponding version in Islamic context.

## CONCLUSION

It could be understood from previous sections that the main purpose of the discussed explanations of Christ’s atonement is to find a way for coordinating the issue of salvation with two main attributes of God: mercifulness and justice. For, if God forgives sinner for no reason, He does not have justice, and, if He does not forgive sinners, He does not have mercifulness. The same interpretation holds for intercession in the Islamic context; redemption and removing sins must be compatible with God’s mercifulness and justice. Therefore, among the above explanations and theories about both atonement and intercession, we have to find the explanation that is compatible with these attributes of God. Regarding the above interpretations for each theory, it seems that the second understanding of moral exemplar explanation, and also Swinburne’s opinion, can almost satisfy this expectation. In these explanations, on the one hand, the role of human

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<sup>16</sup> Of course, the love and pleasure brought about by intercession is a specific love and pleasure; however, God still has a great general love and pleasure for all creatures.

beings to obtain salvation is defended; this shows that, based on His justice, God does not forgive a sinner with no reason. On the other hand, when sinners do their obligations, God helps them to complete the salvation process through Christ’s atonement (in Christianity) or intercessors’ intercession (in Islam). This indicates that, based on His mercifulness, punishing creatures does not satisfy God.

More importantly, the first three explanations, with some modifications, do not have a serious inconsistency to each other. This means that we can indicate them under a more general explanation in both Islam and Christianity, in which the role of Satan, humans’ willing, doing good deeds, religious rituals, an active moral exemplar, God’s rights, and people’s penance is considered.

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