

Sharing Our Paradoxes

Steps for a dialogue between Christians and Muslims

Introduction

The dictionary explains the word paradox as follows: “A statement or proposition seemingly self-contradictory or absurd, and yet explicable as expressing a truth”.¹ As with all religions, Christianity and Islam contain statements and customs that are contrasting or even apparently contradictory. For example, we hear about the transcendence and the immanence of God, the command to proclaim the truth and also the exhortation to enter into dialogue with other religions, the call to forgive others and also the permission to fight and to exact retribution from them. Jesus uttered many paradoxical sayings, which, at first sight, could surprise or even baffle us. For example: “Many who are first will be last, and the last first” (Mk. 10.31) and “many are called, but few are chosen” (Matt. 22.14). Efforts to eliminate these paradoxes would seem to impoverish Christ’s teaching.

Paradoxes can lead to a deeper faith

Believers often wrestle with these apparent contradictions present in their religious traditions. One way of dealing with them is to highlight one element of the apparent contradiction and reject the other. Thus, we could emphasize the transcendence of God and disregard God’s immanence, proclaim the truth as we see it and neglect the invitation to dialogue, and so on. A more consistent response would be to allow both elements of these apparently contradictory teachings to fascinate and to challenge us. In this way, paradoxes may actually nourish and enrich our experience of faith. By being open to both sides of an apparent contradiction, we become aware of the paradoxical nature of our beliefs and discover new ways to understand them.

Paradox may actually serve as an instrument with which the Scriptures lead our minds into new ways of thinking and feeling. It seems to me that both the Bible and the Qur’an use paradox as an expression of the greatness and the mystery of God. Hence, there is no need to play down the significance of paradox found in the Bible and the Qur’an. On the contrary, my purpose in this article is to let these paradoxes make their full and abiding impact. So instead of trying to avoid dealing with such apparent contradictions, I intend to highlight them through examples from the Bible and the Qur’an in the hope that these paradoxes might mould and deepen our common faith. As a result, the presence of paradox may actually open up a deeper level of understanding and interaction between Christians and Muslims as opposed to being an obstacle.

¹ Encyclopedic World Dictionary, London: Hamlyn, 1971.

Can we compare the Bible with the Qur'an?

Christians and Muslims have different ways of understanding how the Word of God is communicated through the text of their Scriptures. In comparing verses from the Bible and the Qur'an, we need to be aware of the different nature of these two revelations. We cannot compare the Bible and the Qur'an as if these were two books of the same kind. In Christianity, the Word of God is primarily the person of Jesus Christ himself whereas in Islam the Word of God is the sacred text of the Qur'an. Hence, it would be more appropriate to compare the person of Jesus Christ (rather than verses from the New Testament) with the Qur'an. Accordingly, I will not limit myself simply to comparing verses from the Bible and the Qur'an but I hope to initiate a reflection on the way Christians and Muslims have usually understood and interpreted certain passages from their Scriptures. I would like to do this by articulating and bringing together some passages from the Bible and the Qur'an that would readily be recognized as paradoxes.

Consistency and difference

The presence of paradox should not militate against consistency or harmony in the way believers have interpreted the Bible and the Qur'an. The Gospel of Luke says there must be a fundamental harmony in a believer's life:

Every kingdom divided against itself is heading for ruin, and a household divided against itself collapses (Lk.11.17).

The Qur'an also affirms that its message is consistent:

Will they not think about this Qur'an? If it had been from anyone other than God, they would have found much inconsistency in it (Q. 4.82).²

However, the Qur'an does not hide the evident fact of differences between peoples and nations but reminds us that the differences that exist among believers will be clarified only after the Last Day:

You will all return to God and He will make clear to you the matters you differed about (Q. 5.48).

Differences and even apparent contradictions need not be explained away or rejected as unhelpful or too disturbing because they will always remain part of the very core experience of our common faith. Since they are significant ways of expressing our respective faith traditions, such differences and paradoxes need not be a barrier to friendship between Christians and Muslims. In fact, recognition and acceptance of paradox may actually bind us closer together.³

² In his translation of the Qur'an, Muhammad Asad translates the word for 'inconsistency' (*ikhtilaf*) in this verse as 'inner contradiction' and says that "the fact that it is free of all inner contradiction – in spite of its having been revealed gradually, over a period of twenty-three years – should convince them that it has not been composed by Muhammad . . . but could only have originated from a supra-human source." *The Message of the Qur'an, Translated and Explained* by Muhammad Asad, England: the Book Foundation, 2003, p. 138, footnote 97.

³ "Friendship reminds us that the objectivity of truth does not reject the subjective. It integrates the particular and the universal, achieving the *coincidentia oppositorum*, the reconciliation of opposites. Nicholas of Cusa, a fifteenth-century cardinal, statesman, mathematician, and mystic, said that God is found 'beyond the coincidence of contradictories.'" His Holiness The Dalai Lama, *The Good Heart*, Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1996, p. 9.

Various responses to paradox

A mature faith grapples with the inconsistencies that are present within all faith traditions and does not engage in efforts to eradicate them. For instance, Amina Wadud⁴ argues that the polarities within Islam can be harmonized by the principle of *tawhid*. She writes:

Tawhid is the operating principle of equilibrium and cosmic harmony. It operates between the metaphysical and physical realities of the created universe, as well as within them both. On a theological level, *tawhid* relates to the transcendent and yet eminent divinity or ultimate reality, the ‘unicity’ of Allah.⁵

Wadud recognizes that these polarities are an evident fact in the world but considers them to be reconcilable. She says: “In Islamic cosmological thinking, the universe is perceived as equilibrium, built on harmonious polar relationships between the pairs that make up all things.”⁶ A believer is one who struggles to reconcile the polarities and the paradoxes that continue to appear as Christians and Muslims live and interact in the world.

Some religious authors, however, try to eliminate every trace of inconsistency or contradiction they can identify. I am of the opinion that these authors do a great disservice to the faith of believers. For example, Maurice Bucaille, the French convert to Islam, looks for evidence in history and in science to prove that the Qur’an is free of contradiction.⁷ Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, a contemporary scholar from India, seems to follow this logic by trying to prove that the discoveries of science have not contradicted the Qur’an:

The Qur’anic description of certain stages in the development of the embryo corresponds exactly to what we know about it today, and the Qur’an does not contain a single statement that is open to criticism from modern science.”⁸

In contrast to such consistency in the Qur’an, Wahiduddin Khan finds evidence of inner contradiction in secular writings such as those of Karl Marx. He says that even the Bible is not free of such “internal contradictions” and “inconsistencies” but that “the Qur’an, on the other hand, is completely free of self-contradiction of this nature, and there is absolute harmony in its content”.⁹ The urge to establish the consistency and harmony of the Qur’an may have caused these authors to overlook the evident paradoxes that I would like to identify and discuss below.

Christian authors, on the other hand, tend to recognize and even to dwell on the obvious differences and inconsistencies that exist in the Synoptic Gospels. For example, there is an evident discrepancy in the way that Mathew and Mark present the genealogy of Christ and there are many differences in the accounts concerning the life, death and resurrection

⁴ Amina Wadud is a modern Muslim feminist who teaches in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University, USA.

⁵ *Inside the Gender Jihad; Women’s Reform in Islam*, by Amina Wadud, Oxford: Oneworld, 2006, p. 28.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 46.

⁷ Cf. Maurice Bucaille, *The Bible, The Qur’an and Science*, first published in 1970.

⁸ *The Qur’an; an Abiding Wonder*, by Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, New Delhi: Goodword Books, 1999, p. 43.

⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 24-27.

of Jesus in the Gospels. A recent commentary on the Bible says: “Our four canonical Gospels are very different and give four different presentations of the life of Jesus.”¹⁰ Most Christians understand these differences in terms of the different theological approaches adopted by the Gospel writers. As the same commentary goes on to explain:

Each of the Gospels presents the story of Jesus in a different way, and much of their richness is lost if one tries to harmonize them into one consistent account. Each Gospel contains a different structure, develops different themes, and portrays the person of Jesus in its own unique way.¹¹

These authors would consider efforts to eradicate such differences and inconsistencies as a failure to understand the intention of the author leading to an impoverishment of the Gospel text.

I have chosen five paradoxes to illustrate the kind of paradoxes that I find within Christianity and Islam. I shall now present them briefly.

The first paradox is that Christians and Muslims regard themselves as both the servants and the friends of God.

Christ came to serve and not to be served (Mk.10.45). He told his disciples to consider themselves merely as servants (Lk.17.10) and to be servants of one another (Mk.10.43-44). Christ gave an example of service by washing the feet of his disciples (Jn.13. 2-17). The New Testament even quotes Jesus as describing suitable punishment for a bad servant as follows: “As for this good-for-nothing servant, throw him out into the dark, where there will be weeping and grinding of teeth” (Mat. 25.30).

Yet Christ had a very loving and intimate relationship with God, whom he addressed as “*Abba* (Father)!” (Mk.14.36). By telling them that they were no longer his servants but his friends (Jn.15.14-15), Christ wanted his disciples to share in this loving relationship with God. The New Testament even calls believers: “the children of God” (1 John 3.1).

In a similar way, the Qur’an calls believers the servants of God (Q.10.107) who surrender their whole lives to God in obedient submission since God is Almighty and “has full knowledge of the secrets of the heart (Q. 5.7). In the Qur’an, even Christ describes himself as a servant: “I am a servant of God” (Q. 19.30).

However, while nothing exists that is greater or more powerful than God, the Qur’an also says that God relates with people in a compassionate way: “God is most compassionate and most merciful towards people,”(Q. 2.143, cf. Q. 4.110). Abraham was a friend of

¹⁰ “Jesus and the Gospels”, by C.M. Tuckett in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, volume VIII, p. 85.

¹¹ “The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” by R.A. Culpepper in *ibid*, Volume IX, p. 3.

God (Q. 4.125) and God is very near: “I respond to those who call Me, so let them respond to Me, and believe in Me, so that they may be guided” (Q. 2.186). According to a well-known hadith, virtue (*ihsan*) is described as follows:

to worship God as if you see Him, and if you do not see Him,
He nonetheless sees you.

The Qur’an invites a believing servant to enter into a relationship with God through which the Almighty is closer to them than their jugular vein (Q. 50.16) and believers are close to the Almighty “in the sense of their being always conscious of Him.”¹²

The second paradox is that Christians and Muslims regard their own faith as the true way yet also affirm the truth of other paths.

It is clear that, for Christians, Christ is the Way to God (Jn.14.6). Yet the New Testament also presents Christ as respecting the faith of others who were outside the community of the Israelites, thereby acknowledging the authenticity of their way to God: “And I tell you that many will come from the east and the west to take their places with Abraham” (Mt.8.11). Jesus is depicted as being astonished at the centurion and remarking: “I tell you, not even in Israel have I found faith like this” (Lk.7.9). Moreover, Christ makes it possible for everyone to be a believer: “Anyone who does the will of God, that person is my brother and sister and mother” (Mk.3.35).

The Catholic Church also acknowledges that those outside the community of the Church can attain salvation, thereby recognizing the value of other paths to God.¹³

Similarly, the Qur’an says that God has chosen *islam* as the true religion: “Today I have perfected your religion for you, completed My blessing upon you, and chosen as your religion *islam*” (Q. 5.3). This is the only true religion: “If anyone seeks a religion other than (*islam*) complete devotion to God, it will not be accepted from him” (Q. 3.85).

Yet the Qur’an also acknowledges the faith of those outside the community of Muslims: “The (Muslim) believers, the Jews, the Christians, and the Sabians – all those who believe in God and the Last Day and do good – will have their rewards with the Lord” (Q. 2.62).¹⁴ The Qur’an openly recognizes and respects the reality of different paths and different ways: “We have assigned a law and a path to each of you” (Q. 5.48).

¹²Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur’an*, ibid, Surah 10, Verse 62, p. 339, footnote 84.

¹³ “The plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator. In the first place amongst these there are the Mohamedans, who, professing to hold the faith of Abraham, along with us adore the one and merciful God, who on the last day will judge mankind. Nor is God far distant from those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God, for it is He who gives to all men life and breath and all things, and as Saviour wills that all men be saved. Those also can attain to salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and moved by grace strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience. Nor does Divine Providence deny the helps necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God and with His grace strive to live a good life.” *Documents of Vatican II: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium)*, Chapter two: On the People of God, no. 16.

The third paradox is that Christians and Muslims welcome every opportunity to announce the truth of their own faith as well as highlighting the importance of dialogue between the faith traditions.

The New Testament presents Christ as sending his disciples out to teach and to baptize in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (Mat.28.19). Christians are told to be “the light of the world” (Mat.5.14). However, at the birth of Christ, the angels made a universal announcement of “peace to men who enjoy his favor” (Lk.2.14). Moreover, when Christ sent his disciples out to the villages, he told them that their first words should be “peace” (Lk.10.5). It is clear that, during his ministry, Christ usually entered into conversation and dialogue with the people whom he met.

The Second Vatican Council has encouraged Christians to live together peacefully with Muslims.¹⁵ Other Church documents state that dialogue and proclamation are not contradictory but are two aspects of an integrated witness to faith.¹⁶

Similarly, the religious tradition based on the Qur’an and the *Sunna* of the Prophet Muhammad does encourage Muslims to invite people to embrace Islam (*da’wa*). However, although the truth has now become clear, there is no question of forcing anyone to accept Islam: “There is no compulsion in religion” (Q. 2.256).¹⁷ The Qur’an tells Muslims to find a common word between them and other believers (Q. 3.64) and states: “Our God and your God are one and the same” (Q. 29.46). In other words, the invitation to embrace Islam does not contradict our common faith (“a common word”). Referring to this phrase from the Qur’an, a large group of Muslim leaders have recently urged Christians and Muslims to recognize the fact that we all obey the same command to love God and one’s neighbour.¹⁸

The fourth paradox is that Christians and Muslims acknowledge two ways of being a believer: an ordinary way and a more perfect way.

¹⁴ Islam is not a new religion and the Qur’an says that believers who lived before the Prophet Muhammad were also Muslims: “God has called you Muslims – both in the past and in this (message)” Q. 22.78. The New Testament also refers to the concept of submission or obedience (Luke 10.25-28, James 4.7 & Eph. 5.22), which is the basic meaning of the word ‘islam’.

¹⁵ “Since in the course of centuries not a few quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Moslems, this sacred synod urges all to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom.” *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate)*, no. 3.

¹⁶ Cf. *Dialogue and Proclamation*, Vatican City, 1999.

¹⁷ Cf. Q.18.29 and Q.10.108.

¹⁸ *A Common Word Between Us and You; an Open Letter and Call from Muslim Religious Leaders: The Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, Jordan, 2007. Australian Edition published by the Columban Mission Institute, Strathfield, with permission from the Webmaster <ACommonWord.com>*

Christ did not come to abolish the law or the prophets (Mat.5.17-18) but instructs everyone seeking fulfilment to follow the way commonly recognized as obedience to the law (Lk.10.25-28). He invites *everyone* who is 'thirsty' and *all* who 'labour and are burdened' to follow his teaching, thereby showing the way for everyone and not just for a chosen few.

Yet Christ also makes it clear that "it is a narrow gate and a hard road that leads to life" (Mat.7.14). He told a questioner: "If you wish to be perfect, go and sell what you own and give the money to the poor" (Mat. 19.21). Christ wants our virtue to go deeper than the norm: "If your virtue goes no deeper than that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never get into the kingdom of heaven" (Mat.5.20). The history of monasticism in the Church indicates that some Christians have embraced a more radical way of following Christ.

In a similar way, the message of the Qur'an is addressed to 'all mankind' and provides the same basic teaching of religion that has been taught by all the Prophets since Abraham: "Say, 'My Lord has guided me to a straight path, an upright religion, the faith of Abraham, a man of pure faith. He was not a polytheist'" (Q.6.161). This is the way for all people to follow. Although Islam has not endorsed monasticism as an authentic response to God, the Qur'an does require a true believer to strive hard (*jihad*). The Qur'an also recognizes different degrees of closeness to Allah (Q.56.10-11) and speaks of 'a steep path' (Q. 90.11-12), which seems to make more than ordinary demands on a believer.

Moreover, Sufism stems from the earliest period of Islam and has developed a variety of 'paths' and 'stations' along which a believer may make progress in virtue.

The fifth paradox is that Christians and Muslims strive against evil in all its forms and also encourage forgiveness and reconciliation.

Christ came not to bring peace but a sword (Mat.10.34) and he publicly criticized the leaders of religion for their hypocrisy (Mat. 23) and drove them out of the temple in a forceful way (Jn.2.13-22). He strongly opposed the injustices that were being inflicted on people in the name of religion by performing miracles of healing for those who were marginalized from society. Eventually, Christ gave his own life as a sign of what the struggle against injustice and oppression can demand of a person. The New Testament stresses that to be a follower of Christ, a believer must be ready to "renounce himself and take up his cross every day" (Lk.9.23).

However, Christ also taught his disciples to forgive their enemies (Mat.18.21-35) and he himself forgave those who were crucifying him (Lk.23.34). When Christ told his disciples to "offer the wicked man no resistance" (Mat. 5.39), he meant that they should

not respond to evil with another evil action. Many Christians as well as non-Christians have understood Christ to be advocating a non-violent response to evil.

Similarly, the Qur'an allows believers to 'fight in the way of God' but forbids aggression: "Fight in God's cause against those who fight you, but do not overstep the limits" (Q. 2.190). Fighting is justified only to eradicate evil and injustice: "Why should you not fight in God's cause and for those oppressed men, women, and children who cry out, 'Lord, rescue us from this town whose people are oppressors!'"(Q. 4.75).

Furthermore, although believers may demand a fair retribution for an evil act done to them, the Qur'an suggests pardon and forgiveness as the preferred option: "In the Torah We prescribed for them a life for a life, an eye for an eye, a nose for a nose, an ear for an ear, a tooth for a tooth, an equal wound for a wound: if anyone forgoes this out of charity, it will serve as atonement for his bad deeds" (Q. 5.45).¹⁹ Fighting must be balanced with pardon.²⁰

Conclusion

These reflections on the sources of Christianity and Islam and their subsequent historical interpretation allow us to conclude that both Christians and Muslims have encountered the presence of paradox in the history of their religious traditions. The purpose of this article is to suggest that there is nothing to be gained from denying or avoiding the reality of paradox. On the contrary, paradoxes can be integrated into a believer's life by letting them speak to us of the mystery of God's greatness. In this way, paradoxes remind us of our human limitations and of the very nature of faith, which invites us to step beyond these limitations into the mystery of God. A believer takes this step, not by pretending there are no paradoxes in the history of these faith traditions but by listening to what these paradoxes have to tell him about the very nature of faith in his own tradition and in the tradition of other believers. If we learn to be receptive to the presence of paradox in our own faith tradition we may be more understanding of the way paradox appears in the faith tradition of others. Ultimately, sustained reflection on the paradoxes to be found within each of our faith traditions may open us to a more profound awareness of the mystery of God.

Fr. Herman Roborgh S.J.

¹⁹ Cf. Q. 2.109 and Q. 3.134.

²⁰ Many *hadith* also refer to this aspect of pardoning and forgoing retribution.