What it means to be human has scarcely been the most pressing issue to have arisen between Christians and Muslims over the last 14 centuries. Nevertheless, the issue has assumed a certain prominence in the modern era. This chapter presents an overview of some pertinent modern Christian–Muslim exchanges presented in two sections: human sinfulness and human dignity, before concluding with a synthetic proposal.

The Christian doctrines of original sin and redemption by Christ are not merely absent from the Qurʾān; it is as though the text sets out systematically to disassemble the infrastructure of Christian soteriology. Jesus is not God’s Son; every remnant of his saviourhood is swept away, the title ‘messiah’ a shell with no content (e.g. Q 4:171), even his name (understood by the Bible to mean ‘God saves’) mysteriously transmuted to ʿĪsā rather than the traditional Arab Christian Yasūʿ (Reynolds 2008: 235). In admittedly ambiguous terms, his death on a cross is denied (Q 4:157–8), and so his resurrection precluded. All of this dovetails neatly with the Qurʾān’s re-telling of the story of the Fall which ends with Adam’s immediate absolution by a merciful God (e.g. Q 2:37). Even vicarious atonement is ruled out, judged to be a moral impossibility (Q 35:18).

Although classical Muslim anti-Christian polemic usually preferred the themes of theology, prophethood and scripture, it did occasionally turn to anthropology and soteriology, as for example does Ibn Taymiyya’s (1263–1328) Jawāb al-ṣaḥiḥ (Michel 1984: 222–4). Thomas Michel summarises the Ḥanbalī scholar’s objections to Christian teaching:

How [. . .] could God imprison in hell prophets like Abraham and Moses for the sin of Adam, when God forgave them their own sins and those of their parents? The Christian teaching is opposed to the justice of God and would allow Satan to imprison upright individuals for the sin of another. Moreover, what is the connection in justice or logic between Christ’s presumed death on the cross and the redemption of individuals from the power of Satan? If Satan was acting wrongly in this, God would not have needed a crucifixion to rectify their situation; if Satan was acting properly in imprisoning them, the crucifixion of Jesus would not make his action improper.

(Michel 1984: 120)

Note that these points, brought to bear in a focussed assault on the very idea of redemption which, in its Christian formulation, is depicted as nonsensical, are theological in nature.
By contrast, this contemporary statement of Shabbir Akhtar has a distinctively modern edge, focussing not on an irreducible theological opposition but on an *anthropological* one:

If the essential element in human nature is, for Muslims, an intellect endowed with the capacity to know and appropriate a salvifically significant theological truth, it is, for Christians, a will defiled by sin. The Fall, in Christian thought, was a unique event which fully determined the total nature of man.

(Akhtar 1990: 154)

This juxtaposition of a healthily optimistic Islam with a bleakly grim Christianity has become something of a meme, rehearsed frequently in forums of debate and dialogue. Whence did it emerge?

Manifestly, it has in its sights reformed Christianity and its doctrine of total depravity. It is a response, in fact, to Protestant missionary work in Muslim lands and to the complaint that the doctrine of justification by faith alone is absent in Islam, a charge which appears repeatedly in Protestant missionary literature, learned and polemical. W.R.W. Gardner’s nuanced analyses of qur’ānic anthropology and soteriology are a case in point. Granted that here is a fine line between making a legitimate interreligious comparison and skewing one’s understanding of another religion by viewing it through the lens of one’s own, and that Gardner treads it more deftly than most, it is telling nevertheless that he cannot resist the pull of reading Islam as deficient Christianity. After an otherwise sensitive reading of the Qur’ān, Gardner concludes that for the early Muslims

there was never any personal sense of assurance that they had been forgiven and would therefore escape the dread punishment of hell. A gloomy despair arising from an ever-present realisation of the threatened torments denounced on the damned is not a conviction of sin.

(Gardner 1914: 41)

He is equally exercised by the Qur’ān’s teaching of salvation by works, albeit works which spring from belief (1914: 35), and complains of Muḥammad’s failure to spot the incompatibility of absolute justice with unconditional forgiveness. ‘[T]here is,’ he observes, ‘no true doctrine of justification in the Qur’ān, which simply asserts that if one repents and seeks to obey the divine commands, God forgives.’ (36) He does at least take some comfort from Q 63:3, which admits, in Gardner’s opinion, the possibility of an irremediable falling away from grace.

One detects here the unstated hermeneutical assumption that Islam is a Christian heresy, first attributed in the East to John of Damascus (676–749) and subsequently restated in medieval Europe by, among others, Peter the Venerable (1092–1156). It is significant that the Cluniac heresiographer, although he thought of Islam as the ‘sum of all heresies’, did not number Pelagianism (belief in justification by works) among the heresies operative in Islam; the (inaccurate) consensus of most medieval Christian writers was, after all, that Islam taught justification by faith, even neglecting the performance of good works to the point of promoting sin (Daniel 1997: 184). The customary labelling of Muslims as Pelagian would have to await the Reformers’ unremitting focus on the doctrine of *sola fide*, which consigned Islam, alongside Catholicism, to the contemptible status of a religion of works. The impressive writings on Islam of the early Swiss reformer Heinrich Bullinger (1504–75) testify to the application of this new soteriological critique.

The slur of Muslim Pelagianism provoked a backlash, as seen in the writing of Rashīd Riḍāʾ (1865–1935), one of the notable modern Islamic reformers. He does not so much give voice to
classical Islam as to an intention to purify and revive the religion for the modern age. A tussle with Christianity provides him with the chance to show Islam to be much more modern in spirit than the *quondam* religion of Europe. Responding explicitly to a Protestant tract, Riḍāʾ objects to the Christian claim that salvation is to be had by believing (even without understanding) rather than by acting (Wood 2008: 141). Turning the tables on medieval Christian polemic, Riḍāʾ argues that it is Islam which imposes the duty to moral behaviour on its neophytes, Christianity which disregards it. Thus Islamic Pelagianism storms the moral high ground and, with a proud boast of exemplary probity, puts forward its claim to the title of modernity.

Riḍāʾ’s intuition is at work in the thought of Palestinian intellectual Ismaʿīl al-Faruqi (1921–86), a protagonist in that important wave of Christian–Muslim dialogue which first broke in the 1960s, and himself a reformist, critical of the Islam of his day. His pioneering *Christian ethics* (1967) foregrounds Riḍāʾ’s notion so thoroughly that anthropology becomes the central plank of his engagement with Christianity. Unlike Riḍāʾ, he is a champion of Islam’s philosophical heritage and in thrall to Kant, Nietzsche, Husserl and Scheler (Fletcher 2015: 34, 59), as well as to two remorseless Muslim critics of Christianity, Ibn Ḥāzm and Ibn Taymiyya. This rich intellectual itinerary lends his interreligious engagement a complex character: the phenomenologist seeks a meta-religious criterion for all religious phenomena (*dīn al-fiqḥ*), whilst his Muslim role-models have instilled a polemical intent; but it is his commitment to rationalism which motivates his thoroughgoing critique both of Christianity and of the traditional Islam of Ashʿarī kalām (66).

Al-Faruqi’s assessment of Christianity’s mistaken trajectory is unoriginal, derivative of intra-Christian disputes. Paul and Augustine are sin-obsessed corruptors of Jesus’ prophetic message, which had sought to move the Judaism of his time beyond its ‘racialism’ by instilling a new ethical universalism. Drawing on elements of postexilic Judaism, Paul, driven by ‘Rabbinic hatred of man and nature’ (al-Faruqi 1967: 206), confects a doctrine al-Faruqi calls ‘peccatism’ (199). The Hellenistic heritage of the Church Fathers prevented them from receiving this teaching until Augustine rehabilitated it, his ‘fundamental disgust and horror at himself he projects upon mankind, constructing all sorts of patchwork theories to give it the appearance of a reasoned system’ (214). Henceforth, Latin Christianity would be subject to his woeful influence, only the impact of Islam preventing comprehensive European decline by inspiring the Renaissance and restoring a healthy classical optimism (164). Luther’s retrieval of peccatism and its readoption by Protestant theology testifies to ‘the corroding influence of Christian nihilism’ (167).

The reification of peccatism allows al-Faruqi to besmirch Christian theologians of vastly divergent views (Barth, Tillich, Maritain . . .); nuanced and moderate accounts of original sin are all written off as tainted by Paul’s insalubrious obsession. It also allows him to throw the essentialist opposition between Islam and Christianity back in the face of Protestant proselytisers, this time with Islam triumphant: Islam ‘claims to redeem; but having redeemed it quickly passes over to the task of doing the Will of God, and bringing about positive results’ (225). Christianity is unable to lift its adherents out of their sinful lives; ‘the Christian is by nature complacent, a passivist, and a proclaimer of an event past’ (227).

Evangelical and other Christians have responded to this line of criticism by clinging to reformed doctrine, insisting that Muslims need to face up to the seriousness of sin. Kenneth Cragg (1913–2012) reiterates the Augustinian position which sparked off the exchange but suggests that the logic of Islam itself, suitably extrapolated, begs for resolution in a soteriology like that of Christianity. Islam limits the extent of God’s salvific outreach to guidance, yet

the more perceptively we acknowledge our liability to the sovereignty whose law, by its summons, makes us truly human, the more urgently we realize our compromise and our rebellion. We have it in us chronically to defy the law, to refuse its claims, to transgress
its charter of our being. So real is this rebellion that it takes us into pseudo-worship, into existence ‘excluding God’, into idol substitutes usurping His prerogative.

(Cragg 1984: 127).

Islam’s own logic implies the requirement of another initiative to overcome human obduracy once and for all. Cragg sees no gulf between the two appraisals of the human condition. The Muslim refusal of atonement is grounded in a theological disagreement: God’s glory is figured by divine kenosis for Christians, for Muslims by divine self-reservation (137).

Some writers, however, contrive not only to subvert any polar opposition between Islam and Christianity but even to smooth out serious structural differences. F.E. Peters’ account of the three Abrahamic religions portrays Christianity and Islam as essentially isomorphic: salvation is the post-mortem life sought by Christians and Muslims alike; both religions derive religious law from their sources in order to attain beatitude and escape hellfire. Peters’ presentation of Christianity almost totally expunges the problematic of redemption from the Gospel (Peters 2003: 358–9). Likewise, the Sufi follower of Christ, Mazhar Mallouhi, shows no interest in the traditional soteriology of Latin Christianity; his attachment to Christ is motivated by what Christ reveals of God rather than anything Christ has done to bring about reconciliation between God and humankind (Chandler 2007).

Our second topic is a subtheme of the question of the modernisation of religion: can Muslims sign up to human rights and religious freedom as framed by the international community? The question is pursued vigorously by modern secularists, Jews and Christians, who, assuming their world view to have been purified by the fires of the Enlightenment and deemed worthy of admittance to the modern world, believe they have something to say to an Islam which, they think, has not. Unlike our first topic, this debate rages well beyond the forum of strictly inter-religious dialogue.

It is incontestable that Islam’s relationship with the global post-World War II human rights agenda has been complex and raised profound hermeneutical questions which have yet to be definitively resolved. Although some Muslim nations backed the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Saudi Arabia did not. Over time, an increasingly assertive Islam has questioned the compatibility of the supposedly universal declaration with Islamic law, particularly regarding sexual equality, human sexuality, religious freedom, certain political rights and corporal punishments. This culminated in the 1990 Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam (CDHRI) by the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, which subordinated all human rights to the šarīʿa.

No consensus has emerged in the Muslim world on whether, to put it succinctly, Islam should be modernised or modernity Islamised; a heated long-term debate is still in progress whose conclusion will depend not least on the easing of large-scale geopolitical tensions.

The contemporary Christian experience is somewhat less fraught. For historical as well as theological reasons, Protestants, after initial reservations, detected a kindred spirit in the ethos of human rights and religious freedom. The Catholic narrative, however, begins with a rejection of rights-talk not unlike that observed among Muslims. Prior to the Second Vatican Council, Catholicism had resisted the very idea of the ‘rights of man’, freighted as it was with French revolutionary secularism; if human beings had rights, they were accorded by God alone. And because ‘error has no rights’, religious freedom was ruled out in those territories in which Catholics were in the majority. The Council itself only came to endorse human rights by embedding them in a Catholic anthropological framework, viz. a triangle of concepts: imago Dei, personhood and human dignity. The declaration Dignitatis humanae (1965), which expresses the new Catholic commitment to religious freedom, is careful to state that the basis for this freedom is the radical demand of human dignity and the human spiritual quest which is part of it. Error may still have no rights, but people do.
Christian Troll (2009: 57–75, relying heavily on Rotraud Wielandt) is a representative Christian voice, appealing to Muslims to mine their tradition for the resources which will empower them to embrace critically the contemporary rights agenda, confident that the appeal to Muslims of the ‘premodern concept of government that constantly mobilizes religious loyalties’ (74) will wear off. He helpfully lists the Qur’anic concepts most frequently used to ground human dignity:

1. **kañamat al-insān** (derived from Q 17:70) denotes special divine favour towards the human creature
2. **khalīfa** (Q 2.30) is the status of human beings as God’s representatives on earth, arguably equivalent to the *imago Dei* doctrine of Christianity
3. **amāna** (Q 33:72) is a special trust given by God to humankind, often interpreted today as indicating moral responsibility
4. The doctrine of the day of **alastu** (Q 7:172) says that all people have committed themselves to witnessing to God
5. Troll might have added the injunction that ‘there is no compulsion in religion’ (Q 2:256), which has been rehabilitated by modernising Muslims as a Qur’anic warrant for religious freedom.

The German Islamicist does not call for structural revolution but incremental change, and several well-known Muslim writers proceed on that line. The Afghan jurist Mohammad Hashim Kamali (2002) considers that Muslims possess sufficient traditional resources for them to endorse the UDHR but counsels the inclusion of human dignity among the formal purposes (*maqāṣid*) of the *sharīʿa*. Regrettably, he fails to find grounds for the dignity of the nonbeliever (i.e. the merely human) in legislative sources, noting that ‘the manifestation of God’s love for humanity, has found more explicit expression in Sufi thought and understanding of Islam than it has in juristic expositions’ (2002: 14).

A strategy advocated by several religious thinkers involves reworking the legal tradition by renouncing the doctrine of abrogation (*naskh*) with regard to other divinely revealed religions. The Sunni Farid Esack (1997) and Shi‘ī Abdulaziz Sachedina (2001, 2009) both maintain that the Qurʾān’s original message affirmed the salvific efficacy of other religions but that the tradition has sought to negate it. Sachedina complains that the political evolution of the Islamic empire prevented *fiqh* from developing a legal code for all citizens, concentrating exclusively on the religious duties of Muslim believers, and wants to see a partial recovery of Muʿtazilism, the better to integrate reason and revelation. Esack takes more distance from the tradition, reading the Qurʾān as a charter for the struggle for social justice. His experience fighting the apartheid regime in his native South Africa persuades him that Muslims are called to collaborate with others. Both these writers again, however, leave unanswered the question: what of the dignity of the nonreligious?

A more radical stance is adopted by Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na‘īm, a disciple of the Sudanese Mahmoud Mohammed Taha (1909–85) executed for his revisionist Qur’anic hermeneutics. Muslims, An-Na‘īm argues, must come to terms with the fact that the world they now live in demands a different approach to the political realm. They have to live both nationally and internationally with western institutions, and that means adapting to make use of these institutions effectively. The new phase of history ushered in during the colonial experience requires a model of participative citizenship. His attempt to give an Islamic justification for the secular state (2008) excludes offering his own interpretation of the sources. Instead, he shows how Muslims have deployed a variety of constitutional frameworks through history. This appeal to historical practice rather than legal niceties is a healthy reminder that doctrinal solutions, like international treaties, are not always worth the paper they are written on.
There is one strand of specifically Catholic thought, prominent in recent years and not infrequently triumphalist in tone, which goes further than does Troll, calling for a radical overhaul of Islam, notably through the retrieval of its philosophical enterprise. Now, Catholicism has not itself taken the rational faculty as an adequate basis for human dignity, a privilege which goes to the \textit{imago Dei}, glossed in contemporary Catholic thought as pertaining to a capacity for personhood. Yet Pope Benedict XVI, in his 2006 Regensburg lecture, emphasises reason above all else as he explains first why he judges the Hellenic inculturation of early Christianity to have been providential, and second, by implication at least, why Islam is prone to violence:

The courage to engage the whole breadth of reason, and not the denial of its grandeur – this is the programme with which a theology grounded in Biblical faith enters into the debates of our time. ‘Not to act reasonably, not to act with \textit{logos}, is contrary to the nature of God’, said Manuel II, according to his Christian understanding of God, in response to his Persian interlocutor.

\textit{(Pope Benedict XVI 2006)}

That \textit{logos} should be the central plank of this \textit{démarche} requires explanation.

As these Catholics see it, Thomism long ago embraced a mitigated Aristotelian hylomorphism whose anthropological point of departure was the concretely existing human being, imbued with a rational faculty and a capacity for intentional agency. Catholic theology incorporated this and so prevented the positing of real human rationality and agency from violating divine sovereignty (and vice versa). It is often said that Islamic Aristotelianism, by contrast, was routed by al-Ghazālī’s celebrated refutation (\textit{Tahāfut al-falāṣīfā}), with Sunnism henceforth committing itself to Ashʿārī \textit{kalām} and, with it, metaphysical occasionalism. Because its rigorous monotheism allows God alone to possess power, occasionalist \textit{kalām} has little place for enduring human identity, let alone effective agency. This theological voluntarism is also fideistic, excluding reason from any role in ascertaining what is pleasing to God. The religious quest becomes the pursuit of the knowledge contained within the divine command, knowledge to which the act of faith is an essential prelude. In such a scheme, it is hard to accord any dignity to the mere unbeliever. Islamic tradition had rejected or reinterpreted the Hadith espousing the Christian idea that human beings are created in the divine image (an idea at odds with \textit{tawḥīd}) and has had no compelling theological reason, as Trinitarian Christians have, to develop a concept of personhood. Hence, a certain Catholic challenge to Muslims asks whether the crushing weight of Qur’ānic monotheism needs to be alleviated to make space for a human dignity which is somehow intrinsic and not merely dependent upon divine whim.

The main lines of this argument were set out in a controversial book by Majid Fakhry (1958). An Arab convert to Catholicism whose subsequent life-project has been the rehabilitation of Islamic philosophy, Fakhry attempted to demonstrate that the theological and philosophical problems to which Islamic occasionalism offered an answer were resolved more adequately by Aquinas who, he claims, safeguards both the autonomy of the natural order and the sovereignty of God. Fazlur Rahman, sensing Catholic triumphalism, decried the book as ‘an exercise in partisan pamphleteering and propaganda’, insisting \textit{a priori} that Aquinas could not possibly have achieved what Fakhry claimed (Rahman 1959: 233).

The alleged requirements of the ‘War on terror’ provoked hawkish western Christians to marshal similar arguments to explain a supposed Muslim propensity for violence. One such analyst, Reilly (2013), bizarrely blames Ashʿārī occasionalism for the phenomenon of militant Islamism (which actually espouses a Salafī critique of \textit{kalām}) and recommends the revival of Muʿtazilism as the \textit{ne plus ultra} in Islamic rationalism (in spite of the fact that Muʿtazilites were also occasionalists).
Yet the philosophical approach need not be triumphalist. David Burrell’s engagement with Thomism and Islamic philosophy brings to light the mutual interpenetration over the longue durée of the three Abrahamic religions’ philosophical explorations of the doctrine of creation (Burrell 2011), showing how Ibn Sīnā, Maimonides, Aquinas and al-Ghazālī each helped transform metaphysics by expounding the idea of the Creator’s unfettered freedom. Burrell’s irenic stance does not blunt his critical edge: if the quest of religious philosophy is to understand how divine and human freedom coexist, then the success of the enterprise guarantees that God’s sovereign freedom is not in competition with creaturely freedom. From here, Burrell follows a surprising trail: instead of heading for the personalist mainland of contemporary Catholic thought, he argues that the metaphysics of noncompetition imply an ethic of nonviolence, exemplified by the Muslim Pashtun independence activist Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan (1890–1988). Thus, Burrell pursues a typically Catholic agenda whilst remaining admirably open to learning from the Muslim other. The present author’s contribution (Howard 2011) shares these ideals, attempting to re-centre the anthropological debate on the role of evolutionary theory in religious thought. The fruitfulness of this approach lies in exploring the profound and complex cultural shifts encoded in this scientific hypothesis as well as highlighting the fact that, in spite of much intellectual creativity, the task of appropriately integrating the insights of evolutionary anthropology into religious thought remains incomplete in both religions; the one modern Muslim to have worked philosophically to construct an anthropology of robust agency and rationality is Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938), but his work has had minimal long-term impact on Islam (Howard 2011: 58–65).

There may be some signs of a ‘turn to the human’ among western Muslims, but a much more vocal tendency is downright opposition to any such thing. In addition to the Islamism which vehemently denies human rights as inimical to God’s rights, an equally robust Sufi voice condemns the anthropocentrism of western modernity (including modern Catholicism) as itself inimical to true religiosity. This stern rebuke is offered by a group of Sufi perennialists, of whom the most prominent is Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1933), heir to the spiritual legacy of René Guénon (1886–1951). For these ‘Traditionalists’, modernity is the decadent product of a civilisation which has abandoned sacred tradition for rationalism and secularism. The Occident took a false turn in adopting an Averroism which the Islamic world had rejected and which led the West down an increasingly secular path (Nasr 1989: 39). The Renaissance saw a lamentable turn away from the transcendent and towards the immanent, reflected in European philosophy and art, the low point on this trajectory being the advent of evolutionary theory in which the scientific study of the human animal had usurped the place of sacred science’s contemplation of the ‘perfect man’ (al-insān al-kāmil). Christians among Traditionalist ranks include Huston Smith and Orthodox theologian James Cutsinger.

Nasr takes the dimmest view possible of a modern world which is ‘essentially evil and accidentally good’ (1989: 85). Far from accommodating it, Christianity must recover its own sacred vocation, resisting the siren calls of immanence. His perennialist Traditionalism, steeped in the philosophical heritage of Islam and, in spite of its being quite unrepresentative of mainstream Islam, an important player in interreligious dialogue, proves that recourse to Islamic philosophy is not necessarily a step on the path to the kind of rationalist reform Pope Benedict XVI may have had in mind.

That both themes expounded here have been nourished by polemic is lamentable, as such discourse stymies honesty and clarity. Is there any way of framing the debate so as to ‘level the playing field’ and promote mutual understanding and respect?

I think there is. Christianity and Islam are postaxial religions, to borrow Karl Jasper’s term, both caught up in the aftermath of what Charles Taylor calls the ‘Great disembedding’ (2007: 151–2). Pre-axial society saw a tight threefold fit: of individual into community into cosmos into...
God’s providential rule. The epochal disembedding of the four strata meant that space grew between them. Suddenly it was possible to conceive that the world was not necessarily in the state God had ordained. Disembedding also led to the emergence of the individual from the collective and, hence, the possibility that she might dispose of an intentional agency which could play some role in the implementation of God’s will.

Disembedding introduces duality into God’s will. Christianity articulated this in terms of two orders of divine activity: creation (nature) and redemption (grace). The human agent is caught between a given nature and a higher, supernatural vocation. In Islam the duality distinguishes the broad swathe of creation, which has no choice in submitting to God’s ontological will, from humankind (and jinn), who alone are free to be less than Muslim and require the guidance of God’s legislative will. Grace and guidance, respectively, complete creation, and hence both must be of purely divine origin.

The intensification of the axial dynamic in occidental modernity puts both these settlements under pressure for not having conceded enough to the individual human agent. The charge against Christianity is that it reserved the supernatural transformation of creation spatially to religious elites and chronologically to the eschaton, conducing to quietism, complacency and alliance with secular authority. In Islam, Ashʿarī fideism and voluntarism come under renewed attack for minimalizing human agency. Both critiques voiced here are valid to some extent, but they need to be heard both simultaneously and without losing sight of the broader picture of two religious traditions whose historical unfolding cannot be summed up in neat philosophical formulae. Both religions agree that humankind is deficient and that God alone can supply what is lacking; for all their differences, they are surely mutually intelligible even if they are, like everything else in late modernity, in a state of seemingly permanent crisis.

Note

1 This duality is present in figures as diverse as Ibn ʿArabī and Ibn Taymiyya (see Chittick 1994: 142, and Hoover 2007: 125).

References


Further reading