

SCHOLAR'S CORNER

In the World Religions section of a “Christian bookstore,” I read in a book about Islam that said one of the reasons that Muslims worship a different God than Christians is that the God of Islam does not love all people, but only the righteous, whereas in Christianity God loves all people. Was that book right about the God of Islam?

In the June 2005 column, I addressed the issue of whether the differences between Christian and Muslim conceptions of God mean that the two groups worship different Gods. I said that if we Christians will allow that Jews worship the same God we do, despite their rejecting trinitarianism, incarnation, atonement and resurrection, should we not extend the same respect to Muslims? After all, Muslims reject the same Christian doctrines as Jews, and they have the same basic conception of God (the all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good, merciful and loving creator) that Jews and Christians do.

I don't know where the writer of that book got the idea that Muslims believe God does not love every human being. Maybe from the common misconception in the West that Muslims believe in a strict and harsh God who delights in punishing people and commands his worshipers to kill all sinners and all non-Muslims.

To counter the book's assertion, I would like to quote from the writings of the scholar and mystic al-Ghazālī

(1058-1111), whose magnum opus, *The Revival of the Religious Sciences*, is the great, comprehensive medieval synthesis of Islamic thought, equivalent to Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*.

In his book on the 99 “beautiful names” of God, al-Ghazālī explains the meanings of the 99 names or attributes of God.

The two most prominent names of God, after “Allah” (which means “God”) itself, are “the merciful” and “the compassionate.” Before meals and generally before any enterprise, Muslims will say “In the Name of God, the merciful, the compassionate,” much as many Christians will say “In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” and cross themselves. God's essential merciful and compassionate nature is thus impressed daily on every Muslim.

Concerning the names “the merciful” and “the compassionate,” al-Ghazālī writes: “The mercy of God is both perfect and inclusive: perfect inasmuch as it wants to fulfill the needs of those in need and does meet

them; and inclusive inasmuch as it embraces both deserving and undeserving, encompassing this world and the next, and includes bare necessities and needs, and special gifts over and above them. So He is utterly and truly merciful.”

It doesn't sound like al-Ghazālī thinks God's mercy is limited to the righteous.

And on the Divine Name “Al-Wadūd” (the loving-kind) al-Ghazālī writes: “‘Al-Wadūd’ the loving-kind is one who wishes all creatures well and accordingly favors them and praises them. Its meaning is close to ‘the merciful’....One is loving-kind who desires for God's creatures whatever he desires for himself; and whoever prefers them to himself is even higher than that....The perfection of that virtue occurs when not even anger, hatred, and the harm he might receive can keep him from altruism and goodness. As the messenger of God [Muhammad] said when his tooth was broken and his face was struck and bloodied: ‘Lord, guide my people, for they do not know.’ Not even their

actions prevented him from intending their good. Or as [Muhammad said to ‘Alī]: ‘If you want to take precedence over those who are close to God, then be reconciled with those who broke with you, give to the ones who excluded you, and forgive the ones who wronged you.’”

Do I hear echoes of Christ's emphasis on forgiveness, as well as the Golden Rule?

Is it not clear that while there are angry Muslims and narrow-minded Muslims, there are also Muslims like al-Ghazālī whose religion is gentle and humane? Truly those in the Christian and Muslim communities who emphasize love and forgiveness have more in common (in spirit, if not in doctrine) than either of them do with the strident militants in their own community.

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