

DIVINE GUIDANCE AND MISGUIDANCE:  
THE ROLE OF PROPHETS, SATANS, AND  
MORAL CHOICE IN ISLAMIC THOUGHT

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the dualistic nature of divine guidance and misguidance within Islamic theology, with a focus on the role of prophecy as a means of divine communication. It posits that God's guidance is supreme, but that misguidance, embodied by Satan, serves a necessary role in giving meaning to human moral choice. The coexistence of prophets and satans is presented as essential to the cosmic order, as the existence of evil is required to define good, and distance from God highlights the value of nearness to Him. The article discusses how prophets, including Adam, Moses, and Muhammad (Peace be upon them), represent divine guidance, while satanic figures—both human and jinn—manifest misguidance. Humans are given the freedom to choose between these paths, a freedom rooted in their creation in the divine form and their responsibility to uphold the "Trust." The article emphasizes the universality of the message of *tawhīd* (the oneness of God) brought by all prophets, though it recognizes differences in the secondary messages tailored to different communities. It also delves into the tension between religious exclusivism and the pluralism implied in the Qur'ānic acknowledgment of Jews and Christians as recipients of divine guidance. In examining the relationship between human freedom, moral responsibility, and the paths of guidance and misguidance, the article underscores the Qur'ānic perspective that true salvation is attained through personal accountability, the rejection of false pride, and adherence to divine guidance. Through this, it critiques modern religious and political exclusivism, pointing out the importance of humility and self-reflection, and warning against the divisive "I am better than he" mentality that characterizes the actions of Iblis.

Prophecy is the means whereby God offers guidance to human beings through human intermediaries. Just as God's mercy takes precedence over his wrath and thereby determines the nature of wrath, so also God's guidance takes precedence over his misguidance. Guidance itself demands the existence of misguidance. Without the misguidance that is embodied by Satan, the prophetic messages would be meaningless. Without distance, there can be no nearness; without wrong, no right; without darkness, no perception of light. All the distinctions that allow for a cosmos to exist depend upon the diversification and differentiation of the divine qualities. On the moral and spiritual level, this diversification becomes manifest through the paths of guidance and misguidance, represented by the prophets and the satans.

Wherever there have been prophets, there have been satans. The Qur'ān uses the word satans to refer both to some of the jinn and to some human beings. To be a satan is to be an enemy of the prophets and an embodiment of misguidance:

*We have appointed to every prophet an enemy-satans from among mankind and jinn, revealing fancy words to each other as delusion. Yet, had thy Lord willed, they would never have done it. So leave them with what they are fabricating. (6:112)*

Just as Adam, our father and the first prophet, was faced with Iblis, so also we are faced with Iblis, his offspring, and their followers. Misguidance is a universal phenomenon, found in the outside world and within ourselves. In the same way, guidance is a universal phenomenon. In other words, the human race is inconceivable without both prophets and satans, because human beings are defined by the freedom they received when they were made in the divine form. They are able to choose among the divine attributes, because all the divine attributes are found within themselves. Just as they can choose God's right hand by following guidance, so also they can choose his left hand by following misguidance. Without that choice, they would not have been free to accept the Trust.

As we have seen,<sup>1</sup> the fundamental message of the prophets is *tawhīd*. In the Islamic perspective, all prophets have brought the first Shahādah: "We never sent a messenger before thee save that We revealed to him, saying, There is no god but I, so worship Me" (21:25). In contrast to the first Shahādah, which designates a divine

guidance that is embodied by all prophets, the second Shahādah refers to the domain of the specific message brought by Muhammad. Other prophets had their own messages that correspond to the second Shahādah:

*Every nation has its messenger.* (10:47)

*We have sent no messenger saw with the tongue of his people.* (14:4)

*To every one of you [messengers] We have appointed a right way and an open road.* (5:48)

The Qur'ān insists that Muslims should not differentiate among the prophets of God. Each prophet, after all, was sent by God with guidance, and the primary message of each is the same:

*Say: We have faith in God, and in that which has been sent down on Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, and Jacob, and the Tribes, and that which was given to Moses and Jesus and the prophets by their Lord. We make no distinction among any of them, and to Him we have submitted* (2:136; cf. 2:285, 3:84)

The Qur'ān tells us in several verses that the later prophets came to confirm the messages of the earlier prophets:

*And when Jesus son of Mary said, "Children of Israel, I am indeed God's messenger to you, confirming the Torah that has gone before me. . . ."* (61:6)

*He has sent down upon thee the Book with the truth, confirming what was before it, and He sent down the Torah and the Gospel aforetime, as guidance to the people.* (3:3)

At the same time, the Qur'ān makes clear that the details of the messages differ. Any distinction that can be made among the messengers has to be made on the basis of the difference in their messages:

*And those messengers— some We have preferred above others. Among them was he to whom God spoke, and He raised some in degrees. And We gave Jesus son of Mary the clear explications, and We confirmed him with the Holy Spirit* (2:253)

*And We have preferred some prophets over others, and We gave David the Psalms.* (17:55)

The idea that every messenger comes with a message that is specific to the people to whom he was sent and that differs in details from other messages is deeply rooted in the Islamic consciousness and is reflected in the titles that are customarily given to the great messengers in Islamic texts. Each title designates the special quality of the messenger that distinguishes him from other messengers. Thus, one of the verses just quoted refers to him "to whom God spoke." Most commentators think that this is a reference to Moses, to whom Islamic sources give the title *kalīm*

(speaking companion), because God spoke to him from the burning bush without the intermediary of Gabriel, and because the Qur'ān says, "And unto Moses We spoke directly" (4:164). But the commentators add that it may also refer to Adam, to whom God spoke in the Garden, and to Muhammad, to whom God spoke during Muhammad's ascent to God (the *mi'raj*). In a similar way, Jesus is usually called God's "spirit" and Abraham his "close friend" (*khalīl*).

In Islamic countries, especially among people untouched by modern education, there is a common belief that all religions accept the first Shahādah, but that each religion has a specific second Shahādah that differs from that of the Muslims. Thus it is thought that the Christians say, "There is no god but God and Jesus is the spirit of God," while the Jews say, "There is no god but God and Moses is God's speaking companion."

The Qur'ān recognizes explicitly that, although the first Shahādah never changes, the domain covered by the second Shahādah differs from message to message. Hence, all the laws that are proper to Jews, for example, are not necessarily proper for Christians, nor do the rulings of the Muslim Shari'ah have any universality (despite the claims of some Muslims). For example, in the following verse, God explains that the Jews have prohibitions that do not apply to Muslims:

*And to the Jewry We have forbidden every beast with claws; and of oxen and sheep We have forbidden them the fat of them, saw what their backs carry, or their entrails, or what is mingled with the bone. (6:146)*

Similarly, the Qur'ān places the following words, which are directed at the Children of Israel, in Jesus' mouth, thus indicating that his Shari'ah differs from that of Moses.

*[I have been sent] to confirm the truth of the Torah that is before me, and to make lawful to you certain things that before were forbidden unto you. (3:50)*

An often recited prayer at the end of Sura 2 of the Qur'ān says, "Our Lord . . . charge us not with a burden such as Thou didst lay upon those before us" (2:286). The commentators say that this refers to the Torah, which is a heavy burden, in contrast to the Muslim Shari'ah, which, in the words of a hadith, is "easy, congenial" (*sahl, samh*).

One of the most delightful expressions of the differing messages entrusted to the prophets is found in the standard accounts of the Prophet's ascent to God, the *mi'raj*. As we saw earlier, Muhammad

met a number of prophets on his way up through the heavens. When he met God, God gave him instructions for his community. On the way back down, Muhammad stopped in each heaven to bid farewell to the prophets. In the sixth heaven, right below the seventh, he met Moses. Moses asked him what sort of acts of worship God had given him for his community. He replied that God had given him fifty *ṣalāts* per day. Moses told him that he had better go back and ask God to lighten the burden. He knew from sorry experience that the people would not be able to carry out such difficult instructions. The Prophet continues:

*I went back, and when He had reduced them by ten, I returned to Moses. Moses said the same as before, so I went back, and when He had reduced them by ten more, I returned to Moses...*

Finally, after Muhammad had moved back and forth between God and Moses several times, God reduced the *ṣalāts* to five. Moses then said to Muhammad:

*Your people are not capable of observing five ṣalāts. I have tested people before your time and have laboured earnestly to prevail over the Children of Israel. So go back to your Lord and ask Him to make things lighter for your people.*

But by this point, the Prophet was too embarrassed to continue asking for reductions. Hence he said: “I have asked my Lord till I am ashamed, but now I am satisfied and I submit.”

Nowadays, discussion of Islamic teachings about prophecy can quickly raise emotions among Muslims. Probably the main reason for this is that in many Islamic countries, religion plays a far greater role in daily life than it does in Europe and America. Hence, generally speaking, political positions are posed in religious terms, and opposition to the policies of other countries can take the form of criticism of other religions.

A second factor that helps keep emotions high in discussions of prophecy is that modernized Muslims commonly take the attitude—as do many people in the West as well—that it is not they who are at fault. Shortcomings must belong to other people, and so whatever the problem may be, the blame must lie in the opponent’s court. This attitude is common throughout the world. For those who recognize the truth of myth, it is highly significant that Iblis was the first person to put the blame in the other’s court. It is he who said, “Now, because You have led me astray....” (7:16). If people followed the example of Adam and Eve, they would look more closely at themselves and find room to recognize that “We have wronged ourselves” (7:23).

Do not think that Iblis's position is found only in politics. It is an everyday reality for all of us. For example, think about the way in which students react when they receive their grades. It is not uncommon to hear someone say, "I got an A in physics, but that lousy English teacher gave me a C." This is Iblis's reaction— the light is mine, but he led me astray. I did good, but any evil is someone else's fault. The reaction of Adam and Eve would be the following: "How kind of that physics teacher to give me an A, but I really messed up in English and received a C-, so I will have to work much harder to make up for my own shortcomings."

In short, in the contemporary political situation, ideology is often posed in terms of the war of good against evil. In such a situation, those who would stress the universality of the Qur'ānic message rarely meet with much success. It is too easy to think that the other guy is at fault and we are fine. And in order to think that way, it is necessary to forget that God's mercy extends to all creatures. If people did remember that God's mercy takes precedence over his wrath, they might have to start searching for faults in themselves and to leave the others to God. They might have to accept that the C- was a gift and that they should have flunked.

### **Judaism and Christianity**

The Qur'ānic depiction of the role of prophets in human history is highly nuanced. On the basis of the Qur'ānic text, we can neither claim that Islam has exclusive rights to the truth nor that other religions are valid without qualification. Rather, all prophets have come with the truth from God, but their followers do not always observe the teachings that the prophets brought. Hence, the Qur'ān frequently criticizes the followers of the two religions with which the early Muslim community had contact, Judaism and Christianity. It maintains that many Jews and Christians have not lived up to God's message to them, a point that has been made by Jewish and Christian reformers throughout history.

Many Muslims would like to make this a universal judgment against other religions, claiming that Islam is the only valid religion left on the face of the earth and forgetting that there is no reason to suppose that Islam is exempt from the same sorts of distortion. Other Muslims do not agree with the sweeping condemnations that fundamentalists of all religious persuasions issue against their perceived enemies. There is, in short, no consensus among contemporary or past Muslims on the issue of Islam and other

religions. But the Qur'ān and the classical commentaries offer plenty of room for a view of things that is full of subtlety and nuance.

Among the general statements the Qur'ān makes about the religions brought by the prophets is the following, found in two places in the text:

*Those who have faith, and those of the Jews, the Christians, and the Sabaeans—whoso has faith in God and the Last Day and works wholesome deeds—their wage awaits them with their Lord, and no fear shall be upon them, neither shall they sorrow.* (2:62, 5:69)

The key issue here, as should be obvious by now, is faith in God. In the Islamic view, faith in God demands *tawhīd*, and *tawhīd* is the message of all the prophets. To the extent that *tawhīd* is established, salvation is assured. So important is the first Shahādah, through which *tawhīd* is expressed, that a hadith found in one of the most reliable sources tells us, “He who dies knowing that there is no god but God will enter the Garden.” Notice that this hadith does not even mention faith. Simply to know the truth of *tawhīd* is sufficient. Another hadith makes a similar point. On the day of resurrection, God will busy himself with weighing good and evil deeds in the scales. The good deeds of each person will be put in one pan and the evil deeds in the other. If good deeds predominate, the person will go to paradise, but if evil deeds predominate, he or she will be thrown into hell. One of the people brought to be judged will be a Muslim who has ninety-nine scrolls listing his evil deeds:

*God will say, “Do you object to anything in this? How My scribes who keep note wronged you?”*

*He will reply, No, my Lord.”*

*God will ask him if he has any excuse, and when he tells his Lord that he has none, He will say, ‘On the contrary, you have with Us one good deed, and you will not be wronged today.’*

*A document will be brought out containing “I witness that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is His servant and His messenger.” God will say, “Come to be weighed.”*

*The man will ask his Lord what this document is that is being brought along with the scrolls, and He will reply, “You will not be wronged.”*

*The scrolls will then be put on one side of the scale, and the document on the other, and the scrolls will become light and the document heavy, for nothing can compare in weight with God's name.*

When the Qur'ān criticizes the followers of other religions, it is criticizing a perceived distortion of *tawhīd*. In doing so, it has



recourse to versions of Christian and Jewish teachings to which the followers of those religions do not necessarily subscribe.

To take a simple example, it is commonly said that the Qur'ān rejects the Christian concept of the Trinity. Inasmuch as the Trinity is understood as negating *tawḥīd*, this is true. But not all Christians think that the Trinity negates *tawḥīd*. Quite the contrary, most formulations of the Trinitarian doctrine are careful to preserve God's unity. If "threeness" takes precedence over oneness, then the Qur'ānic criticisms apply. But among Christians, the exact nature of the relationship between the three and the one is a point of recurring debate. One of the actual Qur'ānic verses that are taken as negating the Trinity says, "Those who say, 'God is the third of three' have become truth-concealers" (5:73). Even an elementary knowledge of any Christian catechism tells us that God is not "the third of three." Rather, God is one and three at the same time. Inasmuch as he is three, he presents himself to his creatures as three persons— Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

Another Qur'ānic verse says something similar, but now we have this first verse to help us understand what is being criticized:

*The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only the Messenger of God, and His Word that He committed to Mary, and a Spirit from Him. So have faith in God and His messengers, and do not say, 'Three.' Refrain; better it is for you. God is only One God. (4:171)*

Notice that this passage gives Jesus an extremely exalted position and recognizes that he has qualities possessed by no other prophet.<sup>2</sup> However, it stresses once again that there is but a single God. If faith in Jesus leads to the affirmation of three gods, then the Qur'ān rejects that. But again, the actual Christian position is highly subtle, and few if any Christians would hold that they have faith in other than a single God.

Some Muslim commentators point out that there is nothing wrong in saying "three" so long as it does not mean that God is the *third of three*. If we say that God is the third of *two*, that is fine. The Qur'ān itself says as much:

*Hast thou not seen that God knows whatsoever is in the heavens, and whatsoever is in the earth? Three men conspire not secretly together, but He is the fourth of them, neither five men, but He is the sixth of them, neither fewer than that, neither more than that, but He is with them, wherever they may be. Then He shall tell them what they have done, on the Day of Resurrection. Surely God has knowledge of everything. (58:7)*

Another Christian concept that the Qur'ān criticizes vehemently is that Jesus should be God's son. The verse just cited that negates "three" continues by saying, "Glory be to Him— that He should have a son!" (4:171). Elsewhere the Qur'ān says, "How should He have a son, seeing that He has no female companion, and He created all things, and He has knowledge of everything?" (6:102).

Qur'ānic usage and the general Muslim understanding make clear that by son, Muslims understand not a symbol or a metaphor, but a physical son, born of a mother, God's supposed female companion. It may be that some Christians have thought that God has taken a wife, or that he somehow impregnated the Virgin Mary, giving birth to his son. But no Christian theologian has ever imagined such a thing. For Christians, Jesus' sonship is a reality, but it cannot be taken in a physical sense. The fact that Mary is often called the Mother of God does not help clear up the matter for Muslims, who have only the Qur'ānic text and popular misconceptions of an alien religion to go by.

That the idea of sonship is understood by Muslims in a literal sense is obvious, for example, in the short text of Sura 112, often called *Tawhīd*. Anyone who thinks about the implications of sonship and fatherhood will quickly understand that these are relative terms. Everyone who is a son is also (potentially at least) a father, and everyone who is a father is also a son, with the sole exception of Adam. Notice that in affirming *tawhīd*, the Qur'ān not only negates the idea that Jesus could have been God's son, but also the necessary correlative, that God could have been someone else's son, surely the ultimate absurdity in Muslim eyes:

*Say: He is God, One-God, the Everlasting Refuge. He did not give birth, nor was He given birth to, and He has no equal.*

Another very commonly repeated Qur'ānic criticism of Jews and Christians is that they have corrupted their scriptures and therefore invalidated the messages brought to them by the prophets. The Qur'ānic text, however, offers a more ambiguous answer to the question of other scriptures than Muslims may admit. The key Arabic term is *tahrif*, which means to turn something from its proper way, to distort, to alter. Do the following Qur'ānic verses refer to the actual text of the scriptures, or do they refer to the interpretation of the scriptures? Qur'ān commentators take both positions, thus allowing Muslims various alternatives in their attempts to understand the significance of the passage (we translate *tahrif* as "alter"):

*Some of the Jews altered words from their meanings, saying, 'We have heard and we disobey'. . . . Had they but said, 'We hear and we obey,'. . . it would have been better for them. (4:46)*

Notice that in this verse, the Qur'ān does not make a universal judgment, but rather criticizes some followers of the Jewish religion. If the point is interpretation, no one could take exception to this statement, since followers of every religion recognize that some of their co-religionists distort the meaning of scripture. Another verse is as follows:

*So, because [the Jews] broke their compact, We cursed them and made their hearts hard, they alter words from their meanings, and they have forgotten a portion of what they were reminded of. (5:13)*

Here, the Qur'ān connects the issue of textual distortion with guidance and misguidance. Those Jews who broke their covenant with God suffered hardening of their hearts as a divine punishment. Hardening of the heart is a term that the Qur'ān employs to refer to all the consequences of turning away from God. In general, it signifies a dulling of the intelligence and a weakening of the connection with the divine attributes of gentleness, mercy, and beauty. Those whose hearts became hardened fell into further distance from God and greater misguidance. Hence, they began to pervert the meaning of their own scriptures. The prophets had come to remind them, but they forgot some of what the prophets had told them. Their act of forgetting could possibly mean that some of the scripture was lost, but more likely it simply means that those with hardened hearts were unable to understand the meaning of the remembrance; that the divine message embodied in scripture.

In another verse on the same subject, the Qur'ān addresses the Prophet, telling him not to be so eager for the Jews in his environment to listen to his message:

*Art thou then so eager that they should have faith in thee? But there was a group among them who listened to the Speech of God, then altered it knowingly, having understood it. (2:75)*

This verse suggests that accepting Islam is not sufficient, if old habits such as reading scripture to one's own advantage are maintained. But again, this verse refers to "a group of them," not to all Jews.

Some of the polemically minded Muslim theologians investigated the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament looking for

evidence that Jews and Christians had distorted the text of their scriptures. The first to do this, and the one who was the most thorough and systematic in his approach, was the Andalusian scholar Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064). Given that the Islamic concept of scripture diverges from the Jewish and Christian idea in important respects, and given that the Jewish and Christian canons include a great variety of texts written at many different times and from many different perspectives, it is not surprising that the Muslim scholars found much to criticize. Moreover, these critics were often simply repeating what is found in polemical literature written by Jews and Christian sectarians, or by other, often pre-Islamic, critics of the Bible, who may have been Samaritans, Jewish-Christians, Karaites, Gnostics, Hellenistic philosophers, or Manicheans. Some historians of Islam have even suggested that the modern critical study of the Bible— which, of course, has been far more severe on the Bible than Muslims have— received many of its ideas through the intermediary of the Islamic polemical literature.<sup>3</sup>

The Qur'ān commonly refers to the messages given to messengers as 'books'; that is, scriptures. Hence, it refers to the followers of a messenger as "People of the Book" (*ahl al-kitāb*). In most of the thirty verses where the Qur'ān employs this expression, it seems to have in view the Christians and the Jews, the followers of the two religions with which the nascent Muslim community had contact. In two verses, it also mentions the "People of the Reminder" in the same meaning.

In many of the verses where the People of the Book are mentioned, the two sides of the Qur'ānic picture of pre-Islamic religion can easily be seen. Those who observe their scriptures are praiseworthy, while those who do not follow the messages that the prophets delivered to them are blameworthy:

*Many of the People of the Book wish that they might restore you as truth-concealers, after your faith, because of the envy in their souls. (2:109)*

*Some of the People of the Book are a wholesome nation. They recite God's signs in the watches of the night, prostrating themselves, having faith in God and the Last Day, bidding to honour and forbidding dishonour, and vying with one another in good deeds. They are among the wholesome. Whatever good they do, they will not be denied its reward. (3:113-115)*

The Qur'ān is especially critical of the enmity that Christians and Jews have toward each other. Since they accept the Book—*tanḥīd* and prophecy— they should not quarrel. The first verse cited is especially interesting, since it makes a general criticism of all

those who would say that Judaism and Christianity have no foundation:

*The Jews say, "The Christians stand on nothing." The Christians say, "The Jews stand on nothing." But they recite the Book. Even so, those who have no knowledge say the like of what they say. (2:113)*

*Say: "O People of the Book! Come now to a word common between us and you, that we worship none but God, and that we associate no others with Him, and that some of us do not take others as lords, apart from God." And if they turn their backs, say: "Bear witness that we are Muslims."*

*People of the Book! Why do you dispute concerning Abraham? The Torah was not sent down, neither the Gospel, until after him. What, have you no intelligence? (3:64-65)*

There are many more verses of the Qur'ān that refer to Christianity and Judaism, but a thorough analysis would demand a major book. Enough has been said to provide the general picture.<sup>4</sup>

One more point, however, needs to be made in order to clarify a major difference in perspective between the Muslim and Christian view of things. For Christians, God's word is Christ, the "Word made flesh." The Gospels are inspired books written about Christ. The whole New Testament can take on the colour of God's word, but all this is secondary to Christ, who is the word incarnate. One can imagine a Christianity without the New Testament, sustained merely by an oral tradition. But one cannot imagine a Christianity without Christ.

For Muslims, God's Word is the Qur'ān, and Muhammad is simply the messenger. True, he is a perfect human being, God's vicegerent, and the model that God has designated for people to follow. But the message is the primary issue, not the messenger. One can imagine Islam without Muhammad, but not without the Qur'ān.

Muslims see other religions in terms of Islam, which in their eyes is the perfect religion. Of course, followers of other religions also look from their own perspective; this is not a quality unique to Muslims. Hence, Muslims expect other religions to have a book like the Qur'ān, and the Qur'ān provides every reason for them to do so by referring to the Torah and the Gospel. But note that the Qur'ān mentions Gospel in the singular, not in the plural. It states repeatedly that Jesus, God's messenger, was given the Gospel as his message, just as Muhammad was given the Qur'ān. Hence, Muslims are immediately suspicious when they hear that there are four Gospels. This difference of perspective on the role of the human

and scriptural elements makes for endless misunderstandings between Christians and Muslims.

In order to sum up the Islamic view of other religions— Judaism and Christianity in particular— we can say the following: In reading the Qur'ān, many Muslims prefer to stress the passages that are critical of other religions and to ignore or explain away the verses that praise other religions. It cannot be denied that certain Qur'ānic verses provide a strong case for religious exclusivism. However, many Qur'ānic verses leave plenty of room for openness toward other religions. The position Muslims take on this issue depends largely on their own understanding of God's reality. Those who think that God's mercy really does take precedence over his wrath and embraces all those who try to follow his guidance find it easy to see God's guidance in all religions. In contrast, those who prefer to think of God as a stern and somewhat capricious master who issues orders and expects to be obeyed— no questions asked— are much more comfortable thinking that only they (their religious group, their political party) are among the saved.

Sometimes the best way to approach claims regarding exclusive possession of the truth is simply to laugh and to leave things in God's hands. Thus we conclude this section with an anecdote, told to us by one of the ulama many years ago.

Two Iranian scholars were discussing religion. One of them asked the other, "In the last analysis, who goes to paradise?" The other, a poet well known for his sense of humour, answered, "Well, it is really very simple. First, all religions other than Islam are obviously false, so we do not have to consider them. That leaves Islam. But among Muslims, some are Shi'ites and some Sunnis, and we all know that the Sunnis have strayed from the right path and will be thrown into hell. That leaves the Shi'ites. But among Shi'ites, there are the common people and the ulama. Everyone knows that the common people don't care about God and religion, so they will burn in the Fire. That leaves the ulama. But the ulama have become ulama in order to lord it over the common people. That leaves you and me. And I am not so sure about you."

Doesn't this kind of reasoning sound familiar? It is perhaps not wildly inaccurate to say that many of our contemporaries think this way, whether they be Muslims, Christians, Jews, scholars, scientists, politicians, or whatever. And this sort of position sounds suspiciously like that of Iblis, whose motto is, "I am better than he."

## Notes and References

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- <sup>1</sup> This extract is from Dr. Chittick's illuminating study of the Islamic Tradition, *The Vision of Islam*, Paragon House, 1994, repr. Lahore: Suhail Academy, 2000, pp. 164-175. (Ed.)
- <sup>2</sup> See the readable and informative study by H. Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds: Medieval Islam and Bible Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).
- <sup>3</sup> Christians are often struck by this and other Qur'anic passages about Jesus, and some of the evangelically minded among them would like to find here an opening to convert Muslims to the right religion (i.e., their version of Christianity). The typical Muslim response, however, is a yawn. They cannot get excited about any human qualities when "There is nothing real but the Real." After all, they say, so what if Jesus was born of a virgin? That does not make him divine. Adam was created without father or mother, so that should place him a notch above Jesus. The Qur'an itself compares Jesus to Adam: "Surely the likeness of Jesus, in God's sight, is as Adam's likeness. He created him of dust, then said unto him Be! and he was" (3:59).
- <sup>4</sup> Excellent recent studies on the Islamic understanding of Christianity include Jane Dammen McAuliffe, *Qur'anic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) and Neal Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1991).

