

Lutheran Mission Matters



Volume XXVIII, No. 1 (Issue 56) May 2020

Is Islam True Because It Is Logical?

Herbert Hoefler

Abstract: Islamic advocates and defendants have been highly successful in promoting the logical character of Islam. They contrast Islam’s clear, simple logic with the “fantastic and illogical” claims of Christian theology. In order to evangelize the faith and protect our believers, we must clarify the role of logic in every intellectual enterprise, and specifically in religion. Our faith comes from the mind of God, who is above all logic. In fact, it’s very fantastic nature can be viewed as a demonstration of its non-human origin.

Muslims love to debate with Christians.

- You sit beside a Muslim on a train or bus in a Muslim country, and he will open a religious debate with you.
- You Google Islam/Christianity, and you will find many videos of Muslims debating Christianity.
- At the LCMS World Mission conference on outreach to Muslims in 2008, the former head of dawah (witnessing) in the USA spoke. He described their very successful tactic of having a Muslim scholar challenge a local pastor to a public debate when they want to move into a new town.
- In 1985, there was the famous—and catastrophic—debate between Jimmy Swaggart and Ahmed Deedat.

What is behind this Muslim desire for public debate? The reason for their success is that Islam is logical. We humans are very proud of our ability to think logically, and we see this capacity as the best path to determine truth.



Rev. Dr. Herbert Hoefler served as an LCMS missionary to India for fifteen years and later as Area Director for fourteen years and as LCMS Board for Missions’ director for work among Muslims. In 2012 he retired as a Professor of Theology from Concordia University-Portland. herbhoefler@gmail.com

Copyright 2020 Lutheran Society for Missiology. Used by permission.

View Lutheran Mission Matters 28, no. 1 (2020) at <https://lsfm.global/>.

Membership in LFSM is available at <https://www.lsfm.global/join-the-society-for-missiology/>.

E-mail lsfmissiology@gmail.com to purchase a print copy of a single issue.

Determining Truth

Through History

A common path to determining truth is historical evidence. Both religions are historically grounded and founded. They do not claim truth from some ecstatic revelation or from myths or dreams or philosophy. They claim truth from facts of history. However, this approach is problematic for both sides, as they have conflicting claims:

- Both Islam and Christianity claim the accuracy of their founding scriptures, but each disputes that about the other.
- They both look to the excellence of the original community of their faith as paradigmatic of their truth claim, the early Jerusalem church described in Acts 2 and 4 and the community Muhammad formed as governor of Medina.
- The Quran incorporates much of biblical history, but interprets it differently.
- Both claim to be a religion of peace; yet, in history they have been perpetrators of violence and injustice, often against each other.
- Both can point out good that they have done in society through the centuries.
- Both have used political and military power to promote and enforce their religion.
- Both have violently suppressed reform movements.

Through Logic

Historical evidence is not a convincing/persuasive path for either religion. However, Muslim polemicists have found solid ground in theological argument. They can point out that Islamic dogma is clear and simple, very logical. Christian dogma, in contrast, demands the suspension of common reason.

Islamic tenets are clear and reasonable and useful:

- God is one.
- God is the Creator and therefore also the one rightful Judge, Authority, and Lawgiver.
- There is one authoritative book conveyed by one author.
- This book claims to have no contradictions and prophetic predictions of scientific facts.

- There is a record of their final prophet's life in the four traditions of the Hadith, which provide an inspired, concrete model for all facets of personal, social, political, and economic life.
- Through the Quran and the Hadith, clear moral and ethical tenets are provided for righteous, healthy, and prosperous living.
- The confession of faith into the Islamic fold is clear and simple: "Allah is God, and Muhammad is his prophet."
- Finally, and often most convincingly, you get what you deserve in life and in eternity. Your good and bad deeds are fairly weighed, and a just God provides punishment and reward accordingly.

All of this makes total sense. It is clear and simple, realistic and understandable. It can be presented and argued quite logically, even by a common layperson.

Christian Dogma as Illogical

In contrast, the dogmas of Christianity often demand the suspension of logic. Things are complex and confusing and incomprehensible, easily susceptible to incredulity and mockery:

- The obvious one is the doctrine of the Trinity. This description is easily subject to mockery and logical reasoning. It is illogical that three can be one.
- Next is the Incarnation. It requires a suspension of reason to accept that God can and would become man. How can the eternal become the temporal? How can a holy God become part of a sinful world? The logical questions go on and on.
- How about the sacraments among the sacramental churches? Does God need and use material items to convey forgiveness and grace? Why wouldn't (and doesn't) He just do that directly? Are the sacraments of Holy Communion and Baptism some kind of magical, shamanic acts performed by divinely empowered priests?
- How is one accepted into the Christian fold: by the rite of infant baptism, by an ecstatic spiritual moment, by a "born again" experience? It's all very complex and confusing and contradictory.
- And then there's the Bible, written over many centuries with different cultures and worldviews and times and authors and types of literature. A belief is required that all of this was inspired by God in so many diverse ways. A book with many apparent contradictions from one age and author to another, yet inspired by God?

Copyright 2020 Lutheran Society for Missiology. Used by permission.

View *Lutheran Mission Matters* 28, no. 1 (2020) at <https://lsfm.global/>.

Membership in LSFM is available at <https://www.lsfm.global/join-the-society-for-missiology/>.

E-mail lsfmissiology@gmail.com to purchase a print copy of a single issue.

- Such a book is not directly accessible by laypeople. Interpretations of this scripture require scholarly knowledge of all these complexities, and often differing from each other. All very complex and confusing, and requiring a leap of faith rather than clear reason.
- For Christians, the one moral/ethical tenet is to love. But what does that mean in practice? How is that applied in political and economic and social and military contexts? The command is vague and subject to innumerable subjective applications and interpretations.
- Finally, the one dogma that requires the greatest suspension of logic and common reason: you get what you do not deserve. The Christian belief is that God can and did pay for our sin, and we are totally and freely forgiven. It is unjust and unfair and unrealistic and incomprehensible, totally illogical.

It is no wonder that Muslims love to argue religion. Their faith is clear and simple and logical. Our faith is complex and vague and illogical.

Is Logic the Path to Truth?

Philosophical Questions

The great caveat to all this is if logic can determine truth. For one thing, logical systems differ in different cultures. Logical thought processes are culturally determined. Buddhist, Hindu, and Taoist philosophical systems and practices, for example, differ radically from our Western forms of logic. What we see as contradictory, they see as profound and insightful, such as the Buddhist koans, Hindu mystical allegories, and the Taoist yin-yang principle.

Secondly, even in Western philosophy, the ability of the mind to determine a single truth through logic is questioned. Cultural relativism was strongly emphasized in the twentieth century with its view that there is no absolute, universal standard of truth because our interpretation is always shaped by our worldview.

The great twentieth century analytic philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein, calls into question virtually every philosophical system in his famous *Tractatus*.¹ At the end, he concluded that truth of belief can only be approached with a leap of faith. In his final, inimitable words: “At the foundation of well-founded belief lies belief that is not founded.”²

Christian Humility

Yet, we are rational beings, and we need to understand things with our reasoning powers. In Christianity, we do intellectual theologizing. The faith is not irrational. It can—and must—be discussed rationally. We must make sense of it. We must apply it to life. We do not determine our theological truth through logic, for we recognize the

Copyright 2020 Lutheran Society for Missiology. Used by permission.

View Lutheran Mission Matters 28, no. 1 (2020) at <https://lsfm.global/>.

Membership in LSFM is available at <https://www.lsfm.global/join-the-society-for-missiology/>.

E-mail lsfmissiology@gmail.com to purchase a print copy of a single issue.

serious limits of human reasoning to determine truth. We are humble and obedient in our intellectual theologizing.

We can draw this intellectual humility directly from Scripture:

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Is 55:8–9 ESV)

No one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. (1 Cor 2:11b)

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! “For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?” (Rom 11:33–34)

Therefore, as we attempt to present our dogma, we do so with great humility. The ways and thoughts of God are beyond our understanding and comprehension:

- The nature of God is ultimately a mystery. It is beyond any human understanding. Our doctrine of the Trinity is the best we can do in piecing together the evidence of Scripture. However, we know it is not a description of God. Certainly, our vision of God in eternity will be far beyond what we were ever able to formulate while on earth.
- Similarly, our statement “God is love” is an anthropomorphism. God’s being and works are divine. Love is our human explanation, based on our human experience and language. His ways are beyond our comprehension, but we understand that they are always good.
- Love needs an object to love. If God is love from all eternity, that love is expressed and experienced, first of all, within the godhead. In Christian understanding, it is the love among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- Love is the reason for the creation, for each of us, a material object of God’s love. It is this fulfilling life of love which He desires to work in us to share in His joy now and in eternity.

Witnessing among Muslims

Nature of God

Here is where our humility intersects with our witness among Muslims. In any witnessing, we begin our discussion within the worldview of the other person. We begin with what he or she believes is true. In the matter of the nature of God, we agree with them that God is totally free and almighty. If that is true, He can then do whatever He wills:

Copyright 2020 Lutheran Society for Missiology. Used by permission.

View *Lutheran Mission Matters* 28, no. 1 (2020) at <https://lsfm.global/>.

Membership in LSFM is available at <https://www.lsfm.global/join-the-society-for-missiology/>.

E-mail lsfmissiology@gmail.com to purchase a print copy of a single issue.

- If He wills to become a human person, is it impossible for Him to do?
- If He wills to become a perfect sacrifice and payment for sin, can He do it that way?
- If He ordains to use material means to relate in grace to people, might He?
- Is it possible for Him to inspire many different authors in many different cultures and times, if He decides to?
- If He desires to love and forgive people purely by grace, may He?

Ethic of Love

Furthermore, the Christian ethic of love gets to the root of moral and social goodness.

“For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander” (Mt 15:19).

Instead of using commands and threats and punishments to control evil and enforce goodness, the Christian ethic espouses a personal transformation. We desire to do good because we are filled with God’s love for all.

Let us love one another; for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God. . . . If we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. (1 Jn 4:7, 12)

If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. . . . But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law. (Gal 5:18, 22–23)

The Christian ethic seeks to uplift people into goodness. We recognize the possibility of goodness for people. They can be inspired and transformed by the presence of God in them, not just controlled and enforced by human threats and punishments.

In conclusion,

- Christian beliefs may not be logical, but they can still be true. Indeed, a man-made religion would be logically constructed. A divinely worked religion would be a work beyond human comprehension and understanding. It would be one to be accepted in humility and reverence.
- A religion rooted in the works and ways of God would accept the ways in which He sovereignly wills to act, whether by incarnating Himself or sacrificing Himself or using material means to reach material people.

- An ethic inspired by a God of love and grace would be one in which love is the governing principle. It would aim for the transformation of people He loves.
- A theology would humbly try to put into the limits of human language and thought the sovereign works and ways of God.

Christian faith is not blind belief. It is grounded in historical events and records of divine activity. It is not determined by the relativism and limits of human logic. However, it is reasonable and sensible and practical.

Islam is simpler and clearer and more logical. But that may well be the indication that it is not of divine origin. It is a reasonable conclusion, then, that it is not true. As our people are exposed to logical attacks by Muslim advocates, they need to be assured that logic is not the source or determination of truth. Our faith is grounded on the facts of history recorded in Scripture, revealing actions of God that are beyond our comprehension.

Similarly, in our witness among Muslims and all others, we have a faith that is humble and illogical, but does make sense as originating in God, who is beyond our understanding. And so we follow the direction of our Scripture in carrying out this testimony, intellectually: “Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence” (1 Pt 3:15 RSV).

Endnotes

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C. K. Ogden (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1922, 1955; Mineola, NY: Dover ed., 1999).

² Ludwig Wittgenstein, “Proposition 253,” in *On Certainty*, G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright eds., German and English ed., paperback (NYC: Perennial/Harper & Row, 1972), 33.