

Who is God in the Koran?

By Prof. Dr. Christine Schirrmacher

The Koran does not contain any passages which comprise any kind of systematic description of the characteristics of God. In Arabic he is called “Allah”, which means simply “The God”. God does not introduce himself in the Koran like he does in the Old Testament, with the words “I am who I am”, (Exodus 3,14, NASB) but remains hidden – a mystery. He is completely separated from his creation, and cannot be compared at all with any of his created beings, for “Nothing is like him” (Surah 42,11). Because God is a mystery, it is impossible for anybody to try to paint a mental picture of him, or what he is like, and the very attempt would be forbidden. A Muslim believer only knows the names of God, the attributes described in the Koran, and hears about his dealings with mankind. The centre of the Koran’s message is that God is one, that nothing is comparable to him, and that he himself cannot be compared to anything else. This dogma is called the “tauhid”: (The unity/oneness of God)

“He is God, the only, the eternal! He does not conceive, and was not himself conceived! There is no-one like him!” (112,1–4)

This God is characterised by three areas: creation, sustenance, and judgement. The Koran reports that, at the beginning, God created the world and mankind. At the end of time each individual will be judged, and receive his just reward from the almighty, but merciful God, from whom nothing remains hidden, not even a “leaf falling to the ground” (6,59). God is the one God, truly existing, transcendent, almighty, all-present, unchangeable, never passing away, eternal and uncreated, all-knowing and unlimited in his might:

“He does not conceive, and has not been conceived. He cannot be measured, veils cannot cover him. They try to apprehend him, but cannot grasp him – he cannot be measured by man, no created being compares to him in any respect.” ¹

In Islam today, the idea has emerged, that Allah has 99 names, by which the believer can worship him.

God, the Judge

Right at the beginning of the Islamic faith Muhammad proclaimed God as judge, in a coming day of judgement, in which all people, without exception, would be brought to account, for their actions and belief.

“The hour (of judgement) will certainly come. There is no room for doubt” (40,59).

At the end of time, at the God-appointed hour, the living and the dead will be “brought back” to God:

“And prepare for a day on which God will bring you back. Then, each one will receive the just reward for what he has done! They (mankind) will not be judged unjustly” (2,281).

– for God will judge absolutely justly. The actions of each individual, recorded in a book, will be weighed on a pair of scales. Muslims who have truly believed will come into paradise, whereas unbelievers will be thrown into hell forever.

God, the Almighty

The omnipotence (all-powerfulness) of God is one of the most important characteristics of God in the Koran. The Koran emphasises often how impotent various other gods are in comparison. According to Surah 22,73–74, all other gods, with combined strength, cannot even create a fly, whereas the almighty one is the creator of heaven and earth and each individual. Mankind is to acknowledge the all-powerfulness of God, to recognise himself as created by him, and to serve him, to submit to, and believe in him, as the rightful thanks and praise due to him for his constant mercy.

Although there can be no comparison and no contact between the transcendent God, and his created mortal man, God has allowed mankind to receive knowledge concerning himself, although not knowledge concerning his person, or essence, for it would be unthinkable that God would emerge from his transcendence, become visible for the human eye, or come into the world to reveal himself in a human way. Rather, God sent his word via the angel Gabriel, who then showed it to individual prophets. The prophets then gave God’s messages to mankind – Thus were the revelations of God sent down.

Despite the revelations of God, and his dealings with mankind throughout history, there remains an unbridgeable gulf between God and mankind. This does not mean, however, that God is very distant from mankind, as God is “closer to us than our very arteries” (50,16) This expression, however, is rather intended to emphasise God’s omnipresence. Also the expression: “He is a friend of the believer” (3,68) emphasises God’s mercy with mankind, but is not in any way intended to convey the meaning that God has anything in common with any of his created beings. Similarly, any attempt to use the description of “Father” for God would be completely incompatible with the message of the Koran, which emphasises the uniqueness of God, and his incomparability with any created being – also describing God as Father of Jesus Christ, or Father of any of his subjects. Islam interprets Christian ideas like “sons of God” or the “Fatherhood” of God in a purely physical sense, and firmly rejects any such expressions, as well as the idea of the trinity, which the Koran sees as worshipping other gods besides Allah, such as in the polytheistic religions of Muhammad’s fellow Arabian countrymen.

Apart from the Koran God speaks also to mankind through “signs” which can be recognised in the created world, as well as in the past through the prophets, and the reports of how God dealt with them and their people. With these signs, God’s “call”, so to speak, goes out to mankind, which can be responded to with either faith or disbelief. The words of the prophet Noah in the Koran “Serve God, fear him, and obey me” (71,3) are a classic challenge to his fellow countrymen.

The omnipotence of God, which is mentioned in the Koran, in countless passages, encompasses all areas and regions. God created the world, the animals, mankind, spirits, the angels, as well as good and bad.

"No evil happens, either on the earth, or with you, that was not contained in a book before we carry it out. This is easy for God" (57,22) for "Only that will happen to us, which God has ordained."

God appoints the time of death for each person:

"But God will grant no-one a prolongation, when his time has come" (63,11). It is, after all, God who causes people to believe or disbelieve;

"When God desires to guide someone in the right way, he opens his heart for Islam. If, however, he wants to lead someone into confusion, he makes his heart narrow and confined, as though he would have to rise up to heaven. This is how God punishes those who do not believe" (6,125). The language is even clearer in Surah 7,179:

"Many of the spirits and people were created for hell." The answer to the question of why not all people become Muslims is answered by the Koran, that this is not his will: "And even if the Lord desired it, would all the people on the earth together really believe? Do you want to force people to believe? No-one may believe, unless God permits it" (10,99–100).

At the same time, the Koran emphasises that each individual will be called to account for his belief, or lack of it, on judgement day. Each person will receive the just reward for his conduct on the earth, be it good or bad.

"God does not demand any more from anyone than he is able to perform. Everyone will receive that which is due to him, and his sins will catch up with him" (2,286).

These apparently irreconcilable positions – the responsibility of mankind, and God's predestined decrees for each person to either belief or disbelief – stand next to one another in the Koran. A person cannot hold God responsible for his disbelief or sin, and when a faithful Muslim is permitted to enter paradise, then this is because of God's mercy.

These Koran verses concerning predestination can be seen as reflecting Muhammad's predicament with his countrymen. With his call to return to God, the only almighty God, he was turning away from the absolutely fatalistic religions of his contemporaries in pre – Islamic Arabia. At the same time he also had to somehow explain the continued obstinacy and resistance to his message shown by the people in Mecca and Medina, who, for the first 12 years of his preaching, hardly paid any attention to him at all. Thus, in the Koran, we see the connection between God's absolute power, and the predetermined nature of his ordinances, as well as the responsibilities laid on mankind.

As God is all – powerful, and no – one can really understand and know his nature, an individual Muslim cannot know for certain whether God’s mercy and grace are extended to him, or whether he will be rejected by God at the end of his days, and be sentenced to hell:

“But not so the Lord of mankind, who has created me, who leads and guides me, who gives me to eat and drink, who heals me when I am sick, who lets me die, and makes me alive again, and from whom I hope will forgive me on the day of judgement” (26,77–82).

God is described as the Gracious One, and merciful, even as generous and forgiving, but each Muslim will only receive any assurance concerning forgiveness for his sins after his death. To predict God’s decisions in his judgements would be to put a limit on his power. God’s dealings can never be predicted, otherwise he would have to fit into human expectations and imagination. Nothing and no-one can influence God, and he is accountable to no-one. Also, the God of the Koran is a cunning God. Again and again it is written that he thinks up the best tricks. Surah 13,13 says:

“God is full of tricks” (Literally “God is strong/powerful in tricks/deception”) and “The unbelievers think up cunning tricks, but God does it best of all” (8,30).

God the Creator

Apart from the frequent and general observation that God created heaven and earth, and mankind, the Koran does not contain any detailed report of the creation like in the Old Testament, except in Surah 41,9–13, which describes the creation as having been completed in six days. First God created heaven and earth in two days, out of a forming-mass, then he set mountains, rivers and plants on the earth. Out of water he then made the various animals, and created man to rule over them. We do not read anywhere in the Koran, however, that God made man “In his image”, as emphasised in the Old Testament. (Genesis 1,21). This would be irreconcilable with the greatness and uniqueness of God, who cannot in any way be compared with mankind. Also Surah 40,57 describes the creation of heaven and earth as a “greater wonder” than the creation of man. In contrast, the creation account in the Old Testament describes the making of man as the crowning of creation.

The Koran reports – in harmony with the biblical account of creation – that the whole of mankind is descended from one pair of human beings. (6,98) Adam was formed from a lump of clay. God spoke “Be!” (Arabic: “Kun!”) and Adam was created. (3,59) The creative word of God causes things to happen:

“When he has decided something, he only has to say ‘Be!’ and it happens.”

After the completion of creation, God ascended an angel – borne throne, in the seventh heaven, from whence he rules the eternal realms. In the lower heavens are the moon, sun and stars. In the lowest level of the heavens a watcher stands guard, to prevent the evil spirits from eavesdropping on the angel’s council (37,1–9). God has created the sequence of day and night: the sun and the moon give light in the day, and at night, and, through their regular courses, give mankind the means of measuring time (10,5). God supports the heavens, which have no pillars,

so that they do not fall onto the earth (22,65). The Koran emphasises that God was not tired after the creation, and did not rest, like the God of the Bible:

“We created the heavens and the earth, and everything inbetween in six days, but no tiredness came over us” (50,38). God does not suffer tiredness, and does not require sleep. God does not require Muslims to hold a Sabbath, and so, up until the modern day, there is no official weekly day of rest in the Muslim world, although Friday has a special status. In certain countries Sunday has been introduced as a day of rest, as a result of earlier European colonisation.

God has set mankind on the earth as “followers” or “representatives” (arab. khalifa), and has entrusted him with worldly goods, for the short span of his life, gives him authority over them, allows him to flourish, but requires an account from him at the end of his life, for the way in which he has stewarded these things, and whether he has recognised God as the giver of all things. It can be clearly read in the Koran, that it is God’s will, that there should be rich as well as poor in the world. Both rich and poor are to recognise God as the creator and giver, and God tests each individual, through the circumstances of his life (See, for example, 6,245) to see how he conducts himself. God’s provision is a sign for mankind, through which he can recognise God as the creator.

“It is he, who allows rain to fall out of the clouds ... In this is a sign for those who can receive instruction ... Maybe you would learn gratitude” (16,10–14).

God the Merciful

God exists in the imagination of many people, as a cruel dictator in Islam, acting on whim. Not so, say Muslims, as the Koran emphasises God’s mercy and grace many hundreds of times. Every Surah (except Surah 9) is introduced with the words “In the name of God, the compassionate, the merciful”, or, as it can also be translated, “In the name of the compassionate and merciful God” Surah 7,156, goes even as far to say: “But my mercies know no limit” For the believer, God reveals himself as a merciful giver, who understands and forgives, who hears prayers and protects, whereas the unbeliever can not expect any mercy in God’s judgement.

The Koran states that Allah has revealed himself to mankind through his goodness. Muhammad also is reminded of God’s goodness, and reminds the people to remember his kindness, and be thankful to God for it. This gratitude to God, and the knowledge that everything comes from him, is the mark of a true Muslim, whereas the unbeliever is always ungrateful, as he does not recognise God, and has not submitted to him. The Koran says that God loves those who practice righteousness, and only guides the steps of him who does his will. God does not accommodate his enemies, and those who mock him have nothing to expect apart from wrath and judgement. He does not love the unrighteous, nor the unbeliever, the sinner, and those who practice evil.

The relationship of mankind in relation to God is that of servant, or slave. Each person is to completely submit himself to God, and his will (Arabic: aslama – to submit oneself, to commit, to give oneself up to God, to devote oneself to God’s will, to become a Muslim). The nature of this kind of relationship to God is expressed through the prostrations, to be carried out during the

ritual prayers, five times a day. Surah 35,16 reminds that mankind is “poor, and dependant on God”, whereas God does not have to rely on anyone. Whoever calls on God does not, as the Bible testifies, call on him as his child, but as a servant, the only way in which it is possible to approach him:

“No-one, whether in heaven, or on the earth, is able to approach the merciful one, except he come as a servant” (19,93).

The submission of a person under God’s might, and the recognition of his rulership leads him to fear God, and believe in him. When someone bows down to the gracious and merciful God of the Koran, it shows that he has his ear open for his revelations, and is following the good way, the way of Islam.

Allah, a loving God?

God in the Koran is not only described as merciful and charitable. A few Koran verses speak about the love of God:

“Say: If you love God, then follow me, and so God will love you, and forgive your sin! God is merciful, and ready to forgive” (3,31).

Muslim theologians differ, however, in the various ways in which the love of God is to be understood:

“The orthodox school defines the love of mankind to God as his willingness to obey and serve him, as love for his ordinances, his reverence, and his rewards. For, they argue, love as reciprocal affection, as between friends, or even lovers, implies the equality of lover and beloved. The transcendence of God forbids, however, to think of the relationship between man and God in these terms. The idea that any kind of love, or intimate friendship can come about, is foolish, and intolerable presumption on the part of mankind, and a blasphemous degrading of God.” [2](#)

The rejection of any suggestion that reciprocal love could come about between God and man comes from the concepts of the omnipotence of God, his transcendence and utter otherness, rendering any idea of comparisons to human relationships and feelings as unthinkable.

The Islamic mystics have differing views about the love of God. Here, the believer strives to come close to God, to become one with him, even as far as God actually dwelling in his person. As the believer loses himself in God, his transcendence is overcome, and the unbridgeable gulf between creator and created is crossed. This can only happen through a mystical losing of oneself in God, and this approach is often harshly attacked by orthodox Muslims. The mystics attempt, however, to love God, but, at the end of the day, do not really know if God loves them.

Differences to Biblical statements concerning God as God of love: It is certainly true that there are many similarities between the descriptions of God in the Koran, and the picture of God that we find in the Bible – more so, even, than any sacred writings from any other religious group. God as creator, judge, Lord of the universe, who has given mankind a sacred book, the concept

of sin and forgiveness, the sin of the first humans in paradise, Satan's attempts to lead mankind astray into sin, the judging of mankind, some being permitted to enter paradise, and some being sentenced to hell, the mentioning of Adam, Job, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Mary, and various other personalities from the Bible could prompt the question of whether the similarities between the Koran and the Bible are not, perhaps, greater than the differences. Here are a few examples which should shed some more light on this question:

In comparison to the Bible, it is noticeable that, although the Koran refers constantly to God's grace and mercy, and even from God's love, this love does not describe the essence of God's character, and is not set up as the centre of the Koran's message. The core of the Koran's message testifies of God's uniqueness and oneness (Arabic: tauhid), as well as his power and strength.

Although the Koran uses the word "love", there are basic differences between the meaning and extent of the expression as used in the Bible. Various books in the Bible emphasise that God not only gives love, or deals in a loving way, but that he is love, (1 John 4,8 & 16) and a "God of love" (2 Corinthians 13,11). Thus, the biblical portrayal of God's love, and the extent of it differs very strongly from that of the Koran. The love of God for his created beings is not merely a theoretical concept, but the motive and driving force behind his dealings with mankind in the past, and reached its' climax in the sending of his son, Jesus Christ, for; "God so loved the world, that He sent His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life." (NASB) Jesus, God and man, and son Of God, was an embodiment of love, the same love that God has, and is: "The love of God ... manifested in us" (1 John 4,9; NASB) Because God is love, all love proceeds from God:

"Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God" (1 John 4,7; NASB)

All human relationships, and relationships towards God should be marked by love.

The greatest sacrifice and selfless deed does not count as anything in God's eyes, if the motivation is not love, love for God, and ones' neighbour. The familiar passage which describes love, in Corinthians 13,1–3, describe this impressively:

"If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong, or a clanging cymbal. And if I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing" (NASB)

Because God, the source of all love, has given his love to mankind, so is mankind enabled in his turn, to love God and his neighbour. The first of the Ten Commandments contains this obligation to love:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind ... you shall love your neighbour as yourself” Deuteronomy 6,5+3, and Leviticus 19,18, quoted by Jesus in Matthew 22,37–38. (NASB)

Love then, according to the Bible, should be the distinguishing quality to be found in marriage and family life, within the church community, and extending into relationships with all people, even enemies. Although the Koran does state that reconciliation between warring parties is a precious thing, it does not give any hint that here, particularly, love should rule, and that we should forgive our enemies for their wicked deeds, as Paul does in his letter to the Romans:

“Let love be without hypocrisy ... give preference to one another in honour...contributing to the needs of the saints, practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you, bless and curse not. Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men ... But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him drink, for in so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12, 13 & 14 & 17 & 20–21, NASB)

The frequently repeated connection between love and sacrifice (repeated especially often in the New Testament) is also not to be found in the Koran. We are confronted with these thoughts in the New Testament especially in the context of Jesus’ death, (John 3,16) and also on a more general level: “Greater love has no-one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends” (John 15, 13, NASB) That self-sacrificial attitudes and actions should characterise community life, as well as the unity of family and marriage, as a proof of the love which is there, is a uniquely Biblical concept, also not to be found in the Koran.

The Old, but especially the New Testament, emphasise very often, that the driving force behind God’s dealings with mankind, is his love, and which causes him to save, to remind of his commandments through the prophets, and then finally to send his Son, who was crucified, as the climax of God’s love towards mankind. God, in Jesus, delivers himself up into the hands of his enemies, he gives himself up to achieve salvation for mankind. God’s actions spring up out of love – even before mankind has done anything for God, or even honoured him at all. Because God has sent his son for mankind, people can respond to this love, and carry out those actions which God, in his love, has commanded.

This all – encompassing love, the care of others, ministering to, and caring for those nearest to us, even love for enemies, going even as far as dying for them, is only to be found in the Bible, even when the Koran, in many passages, often uses expressions such as “love” and “mercy”.

-
1. al-Ash'ari. Maqalat al-islamiyyin. Cairo 1950, I, S. 216–217, quoted from Johan Bouman. Gott und Mensch im Koran. Eine Strukturform religiöser Anthropologie anhand des Beispiels Allah und Muhammed. Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt, 1977/1978, p. 3. [↩](#)
 2. Der Koran Arabisch-Deutsch. Übersetzung und wissenschaftlicher Kommentar von Adel Theodor Khoury. 10 Bde. Vol. 2: Sure 2,75–2,212. Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn: Gütersloh, 1991, pp. 207–208. [↩](#)