

# The 'Fall' of Mankind

## Structural Parallels between the Narratives of Sin in Christianity and Islam

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There are unmistakable parallels between the Christian and Islamic understandings of sin. These include the theme of recognition (self-knowledge and knowledge of God), and the content of sin (alienation, lack of faith and disobedience) as well as the result of the Fall (banishment from paradise), and God's reaction (forgiveness, mercy). Nevertheless, despite structurally impressive parallels they are – from the point of view of content – different from each other. In the following I will proceed in three steps. First, I will recall both the Biblical and the Qur'anic narratives of the 'Fall'. Secondly, I will analyse the structural parallels alongside four elements, namely the content of sin, God's reaction to sin, the importance of repentance, and finally, the consequences of the Fall for mankind. In the last part, I will share thoughts on the differences and commonalities evaluated in light of the theology of Christian Reformers such as Luther and Calvin.

### Narratives of the 'Fall' in Qur'an and Bible

Parallels to the Biblical narrative of the Fall (Genesis 3) are evident when considering the overall Qur'anic narrative, for example, according to Sura al-Baqara. Similar to the first book of the Bible, Q 2:35 describes how Adam and his wife were walking in the Garden where they were invited to stay and allowed to eat from all trees, except for one: 'And We said: Adam, stay, you and your wife – in the Garden. And eat unrestrictedly from them, but do not go near this one tree. Otherwise, you will be evildoers.'<sup>2</sup> Similar to that of the Biblical story of the Fall, this passage has to do with seduction. However, in the Qur'an it is not the snake

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<sup>1</sup> English translation of this paper by Randi Lundell.

<sup>2</sup> The corresponding passage in Genesis 3:8, 16, 17 reads: 'Now the Lord had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there He put the man He had formed [...] And the Lord God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil."

who tempts but Satan. According to Q 2:34, Iblīs was the only being (himself a *jinn* or spirit) who did not bow down before Adam. The offence lies in a mistaken idea of the order of rank before God: Iblīs did not acknowledge that God had given Adam knowledge, something that the angels did not possess, and which thus placed him even above the angels.

In both versions, the prohibition is the central point: not to eat from a particular tree. 'But Satan succeeded in misleading them and brought them away from where they were' (Q 2:36). Parallel to Genesis (3:25 and 3:15) the first results of sin are described: banishment from paradise (on the earth) and conflict: 'And We said: Go away! You are each other's enemies. The earth will be your dwelling place and at your disposal only for a time' (Q 2:36). Both religious versions are, in terms of content 'similarly congruent'.<sup>3</sup> The Qur'an and Bible both agree that mankind is not in a position to turn to God all on its own. After mankind has defied God's commandment, it lacks full knowledge to do what is right. According to a Muslim interpretation, man needs guidance. After man turns away from God, He subsequently turns to man: forgiveness and mercy are, in Islam, God's answer to the sins of men. 'Then Adam received some words from his Lord, and He relented towards him' (Q 2:37). He is thus the forgiven one, the one who has turned back again and the one who receives mercy.<sup>4</sup> In this verse we see a double-turning: firstly, Adam does not remain alone in sin, indeed he receives a word from God and man turns toward it. God reveals Himself as forgiving, attentive, and merciful. In the Qur'an, the turning of God toward man is thus understood in the sense of a promise of guidance: God addresses all of the Garden and promises to give guidance (Q 2:38); whoever heeds His guidance does not need to worry (Q 2:39). The key to the idea is included here, 'Remember My mercy, that I have shown to you' (Q 2:40) and the content of that remembering includes repentance.

### Structural Parallels between Both Narratives and their Interpretation in Islam and Christianity

There is evidence for structural parallels between a Qur'anic and a Biblical understanding of sin, namely:

1. as to the content of sin (alienation, lack of faith and disobedience)
2. according to God's reaction (forgiveness and mercy)
3. concerning the conditions for God's reaction (belief and repentance)
4. finally, with regard to the consequences of the 'Fall' (banishment from paradise)

<sup>3</sup> See Bertram Schmitz, *Der Koran. Sura 2 "Die Kuh". Ein religionshistorischer Kommentar*, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 2009, p. 64: 'Inhaltlich ist die Baqarastelle mit Genesis deckungsgleich.'

<sup>4</sup> As a Biblical parallel, the birth of the first child in Genesis 4:1 can be interpreted in the sense of God's (re)turning. 'With the help of the Lord I have brought forth a man.'

Firstly, in relation to the content of sin, according to the Qur'an, sin very clearly means to 'deviate', as well as in its more rigorous tone, 'to declare Our signs to be lies' (Q 2:39). Sin means not to recognise something as pertaining to faith, in a practical or spiritual sense.<sup>5</sup> Wherever divine signs are therefore discerned as 'lies', then 'deception' replaces 'truth' (Q 2:42). There is a striking parallel in the New Testament. In the letter to the Romans, Paul uses a similar image for twisting God's truth: 'They exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator – who is forever praised' (Rom 1:25). In short, God's truth is the recognition that God is God and man is man. Sin means refusing to appreciate this fundamental difference. God is then no longer the Lord of life, but man pretends to be Lord and thus clear, unequivocal obedience to the Lord of life is denied. The resulting conduct of man is not devotion to God, but self-elevation (sin).

Alienation, lack of faith and disobedience are then the result of failing to remember God. Yet happiness, peace and blessedness find those who commemorate God. In this regard, there is the rhetorical question in Q 13:28: 'Doesn't the heart find peace in commemorating God?' There are different ways by which God brings man to the act of divine commemoration: the Qur'an itself is actually described as a 're-collector' or 'admonisher' for God.<sup>6</sup> Thus, these related signs of God (*āyāt*) lead to remembering in a double sense: as a sign of God in creation and as a letter in the verses of the Qur'an. Regarding this double-meaning, Q 18:57 reads: 'Who is more foolish than the person who, having the signs of commemoration of the Lord, turns away from Him and forgets Him?' Finally, God's creation is a reason to remember Him and commemorate Him. Hence the instruction: 'Don't you see that God sends the rain from the heavens, conveys it to the earth and then causes crops of different colours to grow? Then they dry out and you see them become yellow, then He makes them chaff. See, in this is truly an admonition for those of you who have understanding' (Q 39:21).

Secondly, is the matter of God's reaction to sin: mercy and forgiveness. The overcoming of sin through God's mercy is determined in Islam as it is in Christianity, but there is evidence that the idea of mercy has a different connotation. Mercy is primarily God's 'guidance' (Q 2:38), or leading to the right path. The difference between guidance and salvation is occasionally overemphasised in inter-religious literature and the argument made: 'Since a person in Islam is not ruined

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<sup>5</sup> In part paraphrase from Schmitz's commentary; see for this interpretation of V. 39 Betram Schmitz, *Der Koran*, p. 67, the German text reads: 'In 39 A wie B geht es demnach darum, etwas nicht anzuerkennen, es als unwahr zu erklären und zwar im existentiellen, den Glauben betreffenden, praktischen oder gesitigen Sinn.'

<sup>6</sup> In cross-reference to Q 43:5; 11:120 and 6:70. See Angelika Brodersen, "Remembrance", *The Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, Leiden: Brill, 1995, vol. 8, pp. 419–24, at p. 422 argues: 'For the Qur'an is singled out as a means of warning humankind against the consequences of overlooking God.'

through the Fall, he doesn't need salvation, but rather guidance.<sup>7</sup> Certainly, the difference between Islam and Christianity must also be described in relation to the Fall, which will be discussed shortly. However, the desire to see a contrast whereby Islam is a religion of law and Christianity is a religion of salvation, appears to me somewhat forced.<sup>8</sup> And this is the case from both sides. Neither Muslims nor Christians are willing to place Islam only on the side of law, nor Christianity only on the side of salvation. For one thing, in Islam the polyphony of voices on the concept of mercy would be too little valued, since in Islam mercy means, as one may explain, as in Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī's (d. 505/1111) case,<sup>9</sup> something more than guidance (including forgiveness and knowledge of God through His creation). As God in the Qur'an states, 'My mercy embraces all things' (Q 7:156). With respect to Christianity, the polyphony of voices on the notion of forgiveness would thus be forfeited, if one were to abbreviate Christian soteriology entirely on the idea of salvation. This polyphony in the Christian idea of reconciliation is impressively expressed in Calvin's teaching: salvation, liberation, and guidance belong together (as in the priestly, kingly, and prophetic ministries of Christ).<sup>10</sup>

Thirdly, repentance as a condition for forgiveness and mercy. With regard to repentance, it is important to touch on Ghazālī's work, for he wrote an entire book on repentance contained in his 40-volume work *Revival of the Religious Sciences*.<sup>11</sup> For him, the maxim is central: 'Whoever repents of sin is someone who is free of sin.'<sup>12</sup> Repentance, however, does not work without 'belief'.<sup>13</sup> In metaphorical language, Ghazālī goes on: 'When a reasonable person owns a precious pearl and it goes missing [...] he cannot help but cry about its loss. When it goes missing and its loss becomes a cause for his sin, then he has even more to cry

<sup>7</sup> Gustav E. von Grünebaum, *Studien zum Kulturbild und Selbstverständnis des Islam*, Zurich: Artemis Verlag, 1984, p. 174.

<sup>8</sup> See Ralf K. Wüstenberg, *Islam ist Hingabe. Eine Entdeckungsreise in das Innere einer Religion*, Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlag, 2016 (English trans. *Islam as Devotion. A Journey into the Interior of a Religion*, trans. Randi Lundell, Lanham MD: Fortress Academic/Lexington Books, 2019).

<sup>9</sup> Wüstenberg, *Islam*, pp. 71–83.

<sup>10</sup> John Calvin, *Institutio Christianae Religionis Vol. 2 Ch. 15* (= Inst. II, 15), English trans. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. J. T. McNeill, trans. F. L. Battles (= The Library of Christian Classics vol. 20/21), Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011, 1961; German trans. *Unterricht in der christlichen Religion*, trans. Otto Weber, Neukirchen: Neukirchner Verlag, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., 1986. For Calvin, Jesus of Nazareth was not only a priest, but also a prophet and a king. See Ralf K. Wüstenberg, *Christology. How do we Talk about Jesus Christ Today*, Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014, pp. 77–84.

<sup>11</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* ('The Revival of the Religious Sciences'), Book 31: On Repentance. Citation from this book according to my own translation from the German: *Die Stufen der Gottesliebe*, trans. R. Gramlich, Stuttgart: Freiburger Islamstudien 10, 1984, pp. 19–135: 'Die Umkehr. Von den Büchern über "Die Belebung der religiösen Wissenschaften"'.

<sup>12</sup> Hadith cited in al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā'*, Book 31: Repentance (Gramlich, p. 27, n. 13).

<sup>13</sup> See al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā'*, Book 31: Repentance, Chapter 7 (Gramlich, p. 24).

about. Now every hour of life is, indeed every breath is, a precious, irreplaceable and non-exchangeable pearl, for it serves to bring you to everlasting blessedness and to save you from eternal damnation.<sup>14</sup> Even the Prophet often prayed for forgiveness: ‘People, turn in repentance to God and seek refuge in God. I myself turn a hundred times a day in contrition to God.’<sup>15</sup> Although repentance should happen immediately and without delay, there is no such thing as ‘too late.’ ‘God accepts the repentance of the sinner anytime, even up to his last breath.’<sup>16</sup> In the form of a story, Ghazālī tells of a man who, because of the sins that he committed, asks whether there is any chance of repentance for him. When the person he was asking saw ‘the eyes of the man swimming in tears, he said to him: “Paradise has eight gates. Each of the gates can be opened by a man, but not the gate of repentance. That one is guarded by an angel.”’<sup>17</sup> The Islamic view of God includes the sorrowful longing for human repentance: ‘God stretches out His hand to the repentant one for so long as the one who does evil in the night, until the day, and to the one who does evil in the day, to the night, until the sun rises in the west’.<sup>18</sup> This means: up until the final judgment.<sup>19</sup> It goes on to say that God ‘forgives guilt and accepts repentance’ (Q 40:3). On the one hand, any doubt is expelled that ‘every true repentance is accepted by God.’<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, God’s sorrow is expressed, awakening the hope that God’s forgiveness of men will truly be realised. For Ghazālī, the basic idea is, ‘that forgiveness is necessarily a firm corollary to repentance.’<sup>21</sup> In this context, it is understandable that in the Islamic tradition it is possible to talk about God’s turning toward man. Again, this is communicated by way of a story: ‘One person says: “I know that God forgives me”. The other man says: “When?” The first one says, “When He turned toward me.”’<sup>22</sup> Repentance through reflection? If repentance for Ghazālī is connected with ‘guidance’, so we receive hints of connections to Lutheran theology (as will be explored later alongside the distinction between ‘Law and Gospel’).

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> According to a tradition reported by Muslim, cited in al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā’*, Book 31: Repentance (Gramlich, p. 37).

<sup>16</sup> According to a hadith in an authentic tradition of Tirmidhī, cited in al-Ghazālī, *ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā’*, Book 31: Repentance, Chapter 75 (Gramlich, p. 47).

<sup>18</sup> The hadith referred to is narrated by Abū Mūsā al-Ash‘arī; cited in al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā’*, Book 31: Repentance, Chapter 67 (Gramlich, p. 45).

<sup>19</sup> Ideas about the ‘Last Judgment’ are numerous in Islam, Ghazālī dedicated the last of his 40-volume *Ihyā’* to this theme, see for English trans. *The Remembrance of Death and the Afterlife/Kitāb dhikr al-mawt wa-mā ba‘dahu. Book XL of the Revival of the Religious Sciences (Ihyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn)* by al-Ghazālī, trans. T. J. Winter, Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1989; German trans. *Die kostbare Perle im Wissen des Jenseits*, trans. and ed. M. Brugsch, Zypern: Spohr 2009.

<sup>20</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā’*, Book 31: Repentance, Chapter 61 (Gramlich, p. 43).

<sup>21</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā’*, Book 31: Repentance, Chapter 77 (Gramlich, p. 47).

<sup>22</sup> The hadith refers to ‘Abdallāh ibn Salām; cited in al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā’*, Book 31: Repentance, Chapter 77 (Gramlich, p. 47).

Finally, banishment from paradise and God's reaction to the Fall. Bertram Schmitz observes that in Islam humankind was also banished from the Garden;<sup>23</sup> or to retain the metaphor, they had fallen out of paradise. The question to ask is whether God is less of a 'stranger' in Islam than He is in Christianity. For the Christian Reformer Calvin, the disobedience of Adam relates to his lack of faith; in short, 'disobedience is the root of evil.'<sup>24</sup> It was not the eating of the forbidden fruit that 'was the problem, but lack of faith which led to disobedience.'<sup>25</sup> When the person eats the forbidden fruit, he oversteps his God-given boundaries and subsequently undergoes separation from God; Calvin speaks of this in terms of a dividing wall (cloud) between God and man.<sup>26</sup> We cannot therefore go back to a situation where there is no alienation, no lack of faith, or no disobedience. Put succinctly: humankind cannot return to paradise. Might not a Muslim find him or herself in the condition that Calvin discussed under the theme of original sin: alienation, disobedience, and thirst for power?<sup>27</sup>

### Striking Differences and Similarities

A constructivist approach to structural commonalities in the understanding of sin between Christianity and Islam will not eliminate these differences. There is evidence for structural parallels between a Qur'anic and a Biblical understanding of sin, but this does not necessarily imply consensus in terms of its theological contents. Simply put, in both Islam and in Christianity people have fallen, but they have fallen – literally speaking – differently. For Ghazālī, for example, after the Fall, people are still able to obey God, because God has set a path for them, which they have to follow (Q 45:18). According to Christian faith, people have fallen so far that they are not able to help themselves to satisfy the divine commandments by their own efforts (such as in the double-commandment to love, Dtn. 6:5; Lev. 19:18). Luther's experience in the cloister was exactly this: that

<sup>23</sup> See Schmitz, *Der Koran*, p. 66: 'Der Satan verleitet ihn (Adam), so dass er – und damit wie Vers 38 nachträgt: "alle" (der Mensch an sich, die Menschheit) – das Paradies zu verlassen habe.'

<sup>24</sup> Calvin, *Inst.* II, 1,4.

<sup>25</sup> Georg Plasger, *Johannes Calvins Theologie. Eine Einführung*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009, p. 53 (English translation of this citation by Randi Lundell).

<sup>26</sup> Tjarko Stadland, *Rechtfertigung und Heiligung bei Calvin*, Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchner Verlag, 1972, p. 157.

<sup>27</sup> John de Gruchy, *John Calvin. Christian Humanist and Evangelical Reformer*, Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009, p. 155 gives evidence of what 'original sin' means: 'I believe that sin – whether understood as the will-to-power that leads to violence, the destructive self-centeredness that prevents us from loving God or others, or defined of greed, corruption and everything else that dehumanizes us and our fellows – is a reality. We may not interpret the Fall of humanity in the same way as Augustin did, but it remains a symbol of what happens in the real world. Corruption finds a way in every utopian paradise; liberation movements become dictatorships, freedom turns into license, and moral commitments become legalistic and oppressive.'

despite all of his efforts, he could not comply with the obedience he owed to God. For Calvin, likewise, the Fall from grace is so severe that the person can only obey God after his 'rebirth' in baptism as a Christian. 'Rebirth' means two things for Calvin: forgiveness of sins and imputation of the righteousness of Christ. 'Forgiveness of sins means: turning away from the usual way of thinking that God loves only the worthy and punishes the unworthy. In the forgiveness of sins, God reveals the goodness of His majesty beyond human measures of understanding.'<sup>28</sup> Forgiveness of sins is clearly a theme in Islam. Representation in the sense of imputation, or transfer of righteousness, from another being, such as Muhammad, to us (*pro nobis*) is something alien to Islam. For the Christian faith, the attribution of the righteousness of Christ relates to the assumption that in Jesus of Nazareth something special, indeed, whatever is actually authentic about being human is expressed so that the person is capable of love, of keeping the commandments, and of complete obedience.<sup>29</sup> Jesus fulfils the double commandment of love (Dtn. 6:50; Lev. 19:18), which is all that love is capable of: love that 'does not seek itself,' does not 'become bitter,' and 'does not count evil,' (1 Cor. 13). He adheres to the boundaries given by God ('Your Will be done, not mine') and does not question God's commands ('did God say?'). He is obedient and gives himself completely to God, proving himself righteous before Him. In this way, Jesus is more than just a model for us. We not only strive for His righteousness but become part of it due to the righteousness that He has won and that is now, through God's grace and promise, attributed to us (lat. *imputatio*). In sum, Protestant theology lacks a prevailing idea of any representative fulfilment of the law. For the Christian, divine mercy in the sense of guidance and forgiveness is imputed from outside one as a foreign righteousness (*iustitia aliena*); namely, the justification of Jesus' righteousness for me (*pro me*). From this attribution, or imputation, those who are 'born again' grow in obedience to God and are eventually healed in relationship to Christ. According to Calvin, this 'sanctification' is accomplished through a process: little by little (*magis ac magis*), the believer grows in soteriological dependency on God. This idea of growth in faith<sup>30</sup> allows for another comparison with Islam because, for Calvin, now the person is able to obey willingly.

In our dialogue with Islam, it is important to recall what we have heard from Ghazālī: repentance has to do with 're-flection'. Here we receive indications of connecting lines to Lutheran theology, particularly related to the distinction

<sup>28</sup> Stadland, *Rechtfertigung*, p. 152.

<sup>29</sup> See for the following, Wüstenberg, *Christology*, pp. 66–8.

<sup>30</sup> Ralf K. Wüstenberg, "Wachstum im Glauben? Eine Analyse der Rede vom 'Fortschreiten' in Calvins 'Institutio'", *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie (NZStH)*, 46 (2004), pp. 264–7.

between 'Law and Gospel'.<sup>31</sup> 'Reflection', according to the Islamic thinker, 'inflicts a sharp pain on the heart'.<sup>32</sup> This pain arises from personal failure and is evaded, because no one wants to put themselves in this position: 'Therefore the heart flees from it and finds its pleasure rather in the comfortable peace of the things of this world.' On the other hand, whoever allows the pain to continue is (in Lutheran terms: convicted by the 'Law') open to the affection of God (the 'Gospel' as Good News through the redeeming love of God). It would appear that there are similarities to this understanding in Islam, since here also God takes the initiative and turns toward the sinner. Regret is about (similar to the Reformation idea of God's figurative work) 'God's creating activity' and is defined as the 'pain of the heart when it senses that its loved one has gone'.<sup>33</sup> Regret then literally means to turn away from a path that 'leads away from God'.<sup>34</sup> This turning implies for the first time the knowledge and understanding of that fact that the person had previously been on the wrong path.

The recognition of sin also develops from the interrelationship between knowledge of self and knowledge of God. Ghazālī, like Calvin, reflected on this interrelation, advising us to look at ourselves in our 'true being:' 'what you are, where you have come from, where you are going, how you were created, what makes you happy and how you become happy, what makes you sad and how you become sad'.<sup>35</sup> Knowledge of self and knowledge of God comprise for the Islamic theologian, as for Calvin, a similarly continuous process. Calvin even goes so far as to say that it is best if one has learned to dislike oneself.<sup>36</sup> However, whoever

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<sup>31</sup> The assumption is that healing can only take place when there is recognition of the need for it. The individual is confronted, indeed 'reflected' back to himself and, forced to see his own horrible reflection. The law then becomes the tool that drives the person to the Gospel and to an entirely new way of seeing, and to a basically new existential experience. In the prevailing distinction in reformation theology between 'Law' and 'Gospel', the distinction is made between two points of view, or two basic existential experiences. 'Law' means the introduction of a normative standard by which a person is measured: this is the way I should be and I would like to be, but sadly I am not. The 'Gospel' is the other measure: that of being adopted, loved, and accepted without conditions – and all of this, despite the fact that the lover understands what this person is really like. The distinction between Law and Gospel describes two points of view by which the person is measured: as accused, imperiously listing one's sins by name; or as free, not accounting for one's sins and the recipient of a gift. Thus, acknowledgement of one's personal experience of fear is the first step in making healing possible. The distinction between Law and Gospel helps to provide a contrast to the previously unhealthy situation in life. This contrast, however, first introduces the idea that through the suffering of shame and regret the person also realises that 'I live under the power of sin!'

<sup>32</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā'*, Book 31: Repentance, Chapter 21 (Gramlich, p. 29).

<sup>33</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *ibid.*, Chapter 175 (Gramlich, p. 85).

<sup>34</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *ibid.*, Chapter 40 (Gramlich, p. 36).

<sup>35</sup> Al-Ghazālī, "Von der Selbsterkenntnis", *Das Elixier der Glückseligkeit*, trans. H. Rigger, Braunschweig: Spohr Verlag, 2004, pp. 35–73, at p. 35.

<sup>36</sup> Calvin, *Inst.* III, 7–8.



dislikes himself knows utterly that he stands before God empty-handed and is completely dependent on God's mercy.

We recall that in Islam sin begins with forgetting God and His Commands. We again run into the notion that God should be remembered as the Creator and Protector of humanity and of all creation. And even where remembrance is not explicitly mentioned, the relationship points to the meaning of remembrance of God's mercy and His good deeds (especially in the Medinan Sura al-Baqara). Whoever remembers God, knows that God is God and man is man. To sin means to deny this knowledge. God is then no longer Lord of Life, but men have elevated themselves; the simple, ineluctable obedience toward the Creator of life is absent. The attitude is, as we mentioned above, not one of devotion to God, but of self-elevation. The result is disobedience to the command of God and the resulting isolation of man from God; he thinks he is God and thus becomes alienated from himself. He has distanced himself not only from God and from himself, but also from all of creation. As a result, life becomes devoid of meaning, and empty. Finally, God works against this alienation and shows mercy in suffering, so that the person does not remain in sin. Significant in an inter-religious sense, it is also the case that in Islam, God takes the initiative, since He 'accepted his [Adam's] repentance: He is the Ever-Relenting, the Most Merciful [...] When guidance comes from Me, there will be no fear for those who follow my guidance' (Q 2:37–38). The turning of God is the condition that makes it possible for people to find their way back to God. Thus, the mercy of God is also in Islam, as we have seen, constitutive for the overcoming of sin. First, God turns to the fallen person before they receive 'guidance' on the way to Him. I think it is important to underscore this turning of God toward fallen humanity, because here a commonality shines through which has been previously under-represented in interreligious dialogue with Islam.

## Conclusion

A constructivist approach to the commonalities in the understanding of sin between Christianity and Islam will not eliminate the apparent differences. For Ghazālī, people were able to obey God and to follow the way that God has set for them to follow (Q 45:18). For Calvin, the Fall is so severe that the person can only obey God after his 'rebirth' in baptism as a Christian. Reformers of Christianity and Islam, however agree, that unbelief is the root of all sin. Sin is 'anything that bars the gate to knowing God' and additionally – as a consequence – 'the gate of life for men.'<sup>37</sup> Even doubt about God's mercy is considered a sin. Clearly, the missing trust in God is underscored here to the extent that it leads to a lack of

<sup>37</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*, Book 31: Repentance, Chapter 101 (Gramlich, p. 57).

faith. Ghazālī then includes all sins together under this one concept: ‘There is no greater sin than lack of faith.’<sup>38</sup> It is ‘the curtain that separates man from God.’ What brings man ‘closer to God’ is faith – here less in the sense of the gift of grace but understood as obedience in action. According to an Islamic interpretation, for the believer there is neither certainty of God’s judgment nor doubt about His mercy, ‘it is unthinkable that a person who knows God can either feel completely certain or can despair’. Rather, the person is entirely ‘diverted away from himself.’<sup>39</sup> Ghazālī compares faith to the relationship between two lovers, for one ‘is entirely loyal and her concern is entirely focused on the face of her beloved and in thinking about him.’<sup>40</sup> The maxim from Luther’s *Large Catechism*, ‘Whatever your heart hankers after and longs for, that is basically your God’<sup>41</sup> is similar to Ghazālī: ‘Whoever follows their desires, makes their desire into God.’<sup>42</sup> Accordingly, the person who prays to something other than God and makes it into his/her God exists on the level of the ‘punished.’ ‘That is the level where, though adorned with the roots of faith, [they lack] the true fulfilment of their claim.’<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *ibid.*, Chapter 102 (Gramlich, p. 57).

<sup>39</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *ibid.*, Chapter 166 (Gramlich, p. 80).

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Luther, “The Large Catechism”, *Die Bekenntnisschriften der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche. Vollständige Neuedition* (BSELK), ed. Irene Dingel, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014, pp. 932, 2–3; English trans. *The Book of Concord. The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert et al., Philadelphia PA: Fortress, 1959 (English translation from the new German edition).

<sup>42</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā’*, Book 31: Repentance, Chapter 138 (Gramlich, p. 69).

<sup>43</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *ibid.*, Chapter 139 (Gramlich, p. 69).

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