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Impeccability and sinlessness in Islam and Christianity

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Impeccability and Sinlessness in Islam and Christianity

Klaus von Stosch

The last three chapters of this book showed that the debate on the impeccability or sinlessness of Jesus has a striking parallel in Islamic theology, especially within Shiite Islam. Both Shiite and Sunni Muslims agree on the doctrine of 'iṣma of the prophets. 'Iṣma is usually translated as infallibility or inerrancy; in its standard interpretation within Islamic scholastic theology it implies also impeccability or at least sinlessness. Hence, Islam seems to widen the concept of sinlessness to all prophets. Moreover, Shiite Islam includes in this concept not only prophets, but also the Twelve Imams, who they regard as political and spiritual successors of the prophet Mohammed. In this concluding article, I will briefly recapitulate the arguments within this Muslim theological debate and consider whether it sheds some light on the Christological debates outlined in the prior chapters of this book.

1. *Legenhausen's main argument for the impeccability of the prophets and Imams*¹

The main argument for the importance of the sinlessness of the prophets and Imams within Shiite theology is grounded in their role in spiritual (or in some interpretations also political) guidance. The general idea in this argument is the anthropological insight that people need guidance and that therefore a benevolent God will provide humankind with such guidance through persons who are inerrant and impeccable. Such a person is called a *ma'ṣūm* within Shiite belief. As we saw above, Legenhausen reconstructs the formal structure of this argument like this²:

1. God is merciful;
2. so He provides guidance for those who need it;
3. those for whom error is possible require guidance;
4. for anyone other than a *ma'ṣūm*, error is possible;
5. some people are not *ma'ṣūm*;
6. so, God provides guidance for those who are not *ma'ṣūm*.

There cannot be any doubt about premise 1 from a Christian point of view. Premises 4 and 5 are simply definitions within the Shiite terminology which have to be accepted when we take that theology seriously. As the premises do not define who the impeccable persons are, there is no reason to contradict to these premises here. Hence, the main question for the validity of the conclusion in premise 6 is the question of whether we accept premises 2 and 3.

Premise 3 has some plausibility, but it does not prove the necessity of certain infallible persons who provide guidance, but only the necessity of trustworthy information that leads to guidance. There is no need for this guidance to be embodied. And, moreover, it might be that we can get guidance through somebody who commits errors. For example, people go to therapists when they seek for guidance in their life. And they can receive proper guidance if the therapist does her job. In modernity, we trust in different experts for different areas of our life. Modern people only want them to give reliable guidance for certain aspects of their life. They mistrust the idea of a leader for all aspects of life. Moreover, some errors are simply part of the human condition and can even help to create an atmosphere of sympathy that makes trust easier. Even sins and wounds resulting from sin can create

¹ The capital I in Imams wants to illustrate that I refer to the twelve Imams who are conceived as infallible in traditional Shiite thought.

² Legenhausen, *Inerrancy and exaggeration in Shi'i theology* (in this book), 16*.

trust if the other person has learned to deal with her guilt and sin in a convincing way. Hence premise 3 can be challenged if guidance is understood here as guidance through a certain person for aspects of life.

Premise 2 presumes the hidden premise that there are people who need guidance. Again, this is not so clear if guidance is supposed to be exercised by a certain person. If Kant's idea of Enlightenment is correct, it is a question of maturity to be your own guide and to use your own rationality to get orientation.³ Thus, again we can ask whether we really need other persons who are impeccable and inerrant to guide us or whether it is not enough to have certain persons with specific knowledge who guide us in certain respects. Especially in the case of political leadership, it can be asked whether the idea of inerrancy makes any sense because politics seems to imply dealing with different preferences and finding some balance of powers and interests. At least in the understanding of democracy, there is by definition not one perfect leader who can know how to make a synthesis of those different wishes. Instead we need a process of negotiation to come to results that will never be final or perfect. But even in the realm of spirituality, humans seem to be so diverse that the idea of a specific spiritual leader is difficult to understand.

Hence the main problem with the Shiite idea from a Christian point of view seems to be that impeccability is based on the idea of guidance or leadership. In a Christian approach, it is not guidance that one searches for in Jesus, but communion with God. Sinlessness is necessary in this concept because sin is defined as separation from God, and it seems to be the case that a person who is separated from God cannot provide communion or unification with God. But it is important to note that modern Christians would not seek for universal guidance through Jesus.

What is extremely useful in Legenhausen's argumentation is its purely pragmatic reasoning. Hence, let us try to make up a Christian version of the argument mentioned above that takes from him the idea of being more concerned with the pragmatic aspects of sin than with the ontological questions of the theory of the hypostatic union:

1. God is merciful;
2. so God provides communion with God for those who need it;
3. those who are separated from God require communion with God;
4. anyone other than a sinless person is separated from God;
5. a sinless person can only provide people with God's communion if it is divine;
6. so, God provides at least one divine sinless person for those who are separated from God.

This reconstruction of Christian faith does not use the notion of impeccability because it only insists on the definition of sin as separation from God, which makes it impossible to conceive a sinner in communion with God. The problem from a pragmatic perspective is not the danger of the possibility of separation from God, but only the actual separation. Hence, we do not need any reasoning on those possibilities. It is sufficient to conceive of Jesus as sinless and – from a pragmatic point of view – it does not add anything meaningful if Jesus is also impeccable.

The advantage of this reconstruction of Legenhausen's argument is that it does not undermine human autonomy. It does not presume that humans seek for external guidance or leadership, but they only seek for unification with God or communion with God. There is a long tradition within Christianity saying that it is in the nature of humans to seek this unification. Aquinas talks of the natural desire

³ Just remember Kant's famous definition of enlightenment in Immanuel Kant: *Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?* In: *Berlinische Monatsschrift* 12 (1784) 481–494.

(*desiderium naturale*) of every human being to be unified with God. And also Muslims will probably agree with this idea and might use the doctrine of *fiṭra* to explain it.⁴

The difficult point for Muslims in my reconstruction of Legenhausen's argumentation is obviously premise 5. From a Christian point of view, the divinity of the sinless person must be a full divinity in essence because only this essential divinity can have the pragmatic success of providing communion with God and healing human separation from God. Hence, here Christians would be required to explain the theory of the hypostatic union. However, the theory is introduced here for pragmatic reasons and still needs only the absence of a separation of God, not the impossibility of such a separation.

If we again compare Legenhausen's reconstruction and the Christian alternative, it becomes obvious that both approaches understand sin as separation from God. Legenhausen argues that those persons who offer guidance to God – such as the prophets and Imams – cannot be separated from God, i.e., they cannot commit sins. As they want to teach us how to behave, their example has to be free from any sin.⁵ Otherwise we risk losing our way to God. Impeccability is defended here from the perspective of guidance which helps Legenhausen to avoid the problem of the essential divinity of the guiding person. But, as I explained above, it creates the problem of devaluing human autonomy.

Before confronting this reconstruction with the exegetical results of the Biblical part of this book, let us look at another possibility of developing the main Shiite argument for the impeccability of the Imams and prophets and let us see whether the criticism mentioned above fits to this version as well.

2. Haghani Fazl's main argument for the sinlessness of the prophets and Imams

Haghani Fazl reconstructs the argument like this:⁶

- (1) God has intended to guide human beings,
- (2) *'iṣma* of the prophets and Imams facilitates the achievement of this purpose,
- (3) if the prophets and Imams were not Infallible, that would defeat their purpose,
- (4) it is wrong to defeat one's own purpose, and
- (5) it is impossible for God to do something wrong.

In this reconstruction, all theists will immediately agree with premises 4 and 5. Premise 1 is similar to Legenhausen's premise 2. It has the advantage that it does not claim any need for guidance, but only God's intention to guide us. Again from Kant's perspective, we could ask whether God might not have wanted to encourage us to use our own rationality for guidance. However, the premise here is stronger because it says only that God intended to guide us without presuming any need for guidance on the human side. Thus, the free choice of humans is respected whether they want to search for external guidance or not. Premise 2 simply says that God wants to facilitate things, and sometimes it is easier to have external guidance, which is easier to admit than the idea of a need of an external guide.

Premise 3 in this reconstruction leads to the very same problems as premise 3 in Legenhausen's reconstruction. The problem remains why fallible, sinful and imperfect persons should always be bad

⁴ Cf Klaus von Stosch: *Herausforderung Islam. Christliche Annäherungen*. Third edition, Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2019, 117.

⁵ Cf. Legenhausen, Inerrancy and exaggeration in Shi'i theology (in this book), 19*.

⁶ Haghani Fazl, The scope of *'iṣma* and Qur'anic evidence (in this book), 14f*.

guides and leaders. Sobhani even argues at this point that if they had any flaw or committed any breach of good conduct, and even if they suffered from a kind of physical defect or disease that would be repulsive to people, they would not be able to attain the confidence of their followers to be worthy of absolute obedience.⁷ We will not deal with this maximalist interpretation of imamate because it is too obviously at odds with the main sensibilities of democratic and pluralist societies. Of course, physical defects and diseases do not have any negative effect on our trust in other persons. At least this should be the case from a moral point of view. When Sobhani argues that a prophet cannot even make the smallest mistake because then people might extrapolate from that to religious affairs and cease to trust him, this kind of argumentation takes him very far away from everything which can be taken seriously in Western societies. Of course, minor mistakes do not destroy trust and respect. They are simply human and even help to create sympathy. The question is whether one admits mistakes and whether one learns from them. The idea of a perfect leader that was so appealing at the time of Plato lost credibility in modernity because our world is much too complex to be ruled perfectly in all respects by a wise person. We need different sorts of expertise and the current stage of knowledge changes quickly, which makes it important to introduce a system of checks and balances within power. Within this system, everybody who develops expertise in a certain respect can be helpful, and it is not necessary that this person is perfect.

Haghani Fazl seems to see this point and he suggests that “one can examine human communities to see whether a mistake by a leader in his personal life leads his followers to distrust him.”⁸ The result will be that this is not the case if the leader is transparent, honest, and tries to make fewer mistakes in his life. Thus, Haghani Fazl argues that “a leader’s past does not discourage people from following him.”⁹ It is interesting that important traditional scholars within Shiite Islam such as Shaykh Ṣadūq and Shaykh Mufīd also do not accept the maximalist interpretation and they accept at least some minor flaws for the *ma’sūmīn*.¹⁰

However, there is also a problem with weaker interpretations of the idea of the *ma’sūmīn*. Even if we do not take the maximalist interpretation of impeccability into account, there seems to be at least a major agreement within Islam that the prophets should be free from sin “in reception and communication of the revelation”.¹¹ At least at this moment we need absolute reliability, Haghani Fazl argues. Otherwise we do not know whether we are allowed to trust the delivered message of a prophet. Hence, a minimalist interpretation of sinlessness would not claim impeccability in all moments of life, but only protection of sin in the context of revelation.

This interpretation is much more rational and convincing, but it implies an idea of revelation that is rather odd from a modern perspective. Can revelation really be conceived of as a message that is delivered authentically through a prophet? And what does it mean to exclude any kind of error or sin within this process of delivery?

Let us briefly explain those two concerns. Revelation is understood in Christianity today mostly as divine self-communication.¹² The concept of revelation as divine instruction through a certain divine message is usually rejected because it destroys the idea of human autonomy. If we get a message that is of divine origin, we simply have to obey the message. This idea leads to the question why everybody is not getting such messages and whether the ultimate aim of divine messages can be conceived of as obedience. But it also leads to the question of whether divine messages have to be delivered or

⁷ Cf. Legenhausen, *Inerrancy and exaggeration in Shi’i theology* (in this book), 25*.

⁸ Haghani Fazl, *The scope of ‘iṣma and Qur’anic evidence* (in this book), 10*.

⁹ Haghani Fazl, *The scope of ‘iṣma and Qur’anic evidence* (in this book), 11*.

¹⁰ Cf. Legenhausen, *Inerrancy and exaggeration in Shi’i theology* (in this book), 15*.

¹¹ Haghani Fazl, *The scope of ‘iṣma and Qur’anic evidence* (in this book), 9*.

¹² Cf. Klaus von Stosch: *Offenbarung*, Paderborn: utb, 2010.

performed. Performing a message needs creativity and opens up space for freedom. Hence it might be more suitable for a God who wants to encourage our free will and creativity to invite his messengers to perform their messages instead of simply conveying them.

The other concern is about how sinlessness and inerrancy are related. It might be that the weakness of the messenger makes it clear that the message cannot be from the messenger and that it has a divine origin. Human errors might be helpful to create a common sphere between the messenger and us, and it might at the same time underline how much different the message is in itself. I do not want to continue this kind of argumentation because my aim here is not to develop a theory of revelation. I simply wanted to mention briefly that the traditional Shiite position implies some problems for a modern perspective, especially within Christianity.

Modern concerns become overwhelming when the Shiite tradition talks of *absolute obedience*. As we explained above, the usual idea of guidance in modernity, it implies only guidance in certain respects. That is why Legenhausen's renunciation of the idea of absolute obedience in every respect is important. At least he makes it clear that the *ma'sūmīn* do not want to guarantee absolute truths, but they only want "to arrive at definitive judgments about religious law"¹³. Hence, the impeccability serves the interpretation of religious law here. This restriction to a certain area helps one to see that the task of the prophets and Imams has a restricted area. Still, it implies perfection of the human persons and the question arises why this kind of perfection is necessary.

Let us again try to conceive of a Christian version of this argumentation to see more clearly how perfection is conceived of here. I suggest the following reformulation of Haghani Fazl's argumentation:

- (1) God has intended to have communion with human beings,
- (2) the sinlessness of a person mediating God's intention facilitates the achievement of this purpose,
- (3) if this person was not sinless, that would defeat their purpose,
- (4) it is wrong to defeat one's own purpose, and
- (5) it is impossible for God to do something wrong.¹⁴

Again, the Christian shift in comparison with the Shiite idea is that we do not talk about guidance but about communion with God. This difference is expressed in premise 1. It makes it clearer why sinlessness is so important if sin is defined again as separation from God. If God's intention is God's self-communication then this intention can only be communicated through somebody who is not separated from God (premise 2). The other premises are very similar to the Shiite version. Hence, the main question is whether the sinless person is conceived of as communication of the divine presence or whether this person wants to provide us with guidance. At that point, there seems to be an important difference between Shiite Islam and Christianity.

In the end, both concepts require sinlessness, but the arguments are different. Moreover, the Christian concept does not require other perfections such as inerrancy or infallibility. Modern Christianity is fully aware of the fact that Jesus made mistakes and had to learn quite a lot from his fellow humans. Hence, in some respects he is less perfect than the Shiite Imams. If Christians are stereotyped as having exaggerated views on inerrancy, as Legenhausen reminds us¹⁵, these kinds of stereotypes do not work for modern Christian concepts. From a modern perspective, it is no longer true that Shiites are in a middle position between Sunnis and Christians as Legenhausen suggests, but they seem to make

¹³ Legenhausen, Inerrancy and exaggeration in Shi'i theology (in this book), 18*.

¹⁴ Haghani Fazl, The scope of *'isma* and Qur'anic evidence (in this book), 14f*.

¹⁵ Cf. Legenhausen, Inerrancy and exaggeration in Shi'i theology (in this book), 5*.

stronger claims for the perfection of their Imams than Christians make for Jesus. Hence, the observation of Mahdavi Mehr that Sufi esoteric circles go very much in the direction of traditional Christology in their concept of inerrancy is only true for the premodern traditional version of the Christian concept.¹⁶ And if it is allowed to attribute all perfections to the Imams from a Shiite perspective¹⁷, it is not so easy to do the same thing for Jesus from a Christian point of view. The Jesus of modern Christian theology is much weaker than the Imams; he is still on the way to understanding his mission and he errs a lot.

However, even the modern Christ of liberal theology does not commit sins. That is why the Biblical contributions of this book, especially the one from Jeffrey Siker are so challenging.

3. Why is it not possible to admit sins in Jesus?

If we consider the Biblical exegetical contributions in this book, we will see that they offer some important arguments for the conception of Jesus as sinner. Siker argues that the “language of sinlessness, when applied to Jesus, is fundamentally a *metaphor*”¹⁸. It wants to make sense of the death of Jesus on the cross and uses the Biblical idea of the sinless Passover sacrifice to do it. This theological construction led to the idea of a sinless Jesus.¹⁹ But according to Siker, this image is a very late theological construction that is not necessary for interpreting him. “Jesus was a troublesome prophet during his ministry, but nobody gave any thought to his being sinless or perfect. Such thinking only developed after the crucifixion and belief in the resurrection, as the followers of Jesus tried to make sense of what had happened and what they had experienced.”²⁰ Thus, it can be doubted whether the historical Jesus was really without sin. Strotmann goes in the same direction and argues that the fact of the baptism of Jesus is a very strong argument against his sinlessness.

However, such historical claims can be disputed and might lead to different results. There is no narration on Jesus in the Bible that implies an incontrovertible argument for him being a sinner. But Siker gives an interesting systematic argument for his case. He says, “To be fully human is to know the shame of sin, to know the release of repentance and forgiveness, to understand the healing of broken relationships.”²¹ Hence for Siker, Jesus becomes more authentic, more human and more convincing if he knows sin. “It is far more tangible to imagine Jesus as a person whose life took him on a progressive journey of holiness, rather than a perfect human who could do no wrong from the day that his mother Mary brought him into this world.”²²

I agree with Siker that we should not conceive of Jesus as a person who could not do wrong. And I also like the idea of a progressive journey in the life of Jesus. However, I think that the idea of a separation of Jesus from God through sin does destroy the Christian message. If Jesus wants to mediate God’s presence to us, he cannot be successful in this message as someone who does not perform God’s presence in his life. A separation from God is simply impossible if this human really is God’s self-communication. Hence, from a Christian point of view, we have to insist that the life of Jesus is the self-communication and revelation of God’s presence in every moment of his life. Sin cannot undermine this. And if sin is defined as the loss of communication and relation with God, it cannot

¹⁶ Cf. Mahdavi Mehr, How does the theological concept of Imamate define an Imami theology?, 8*.

¹⁷ Cf. Mahdavi Mehr, How does the theological concept of Imamate define an Imami theology?, 10*.

¹⁸ Siker, The sinlessness of Christ and human perfection (in this book), 4*.

¹⁹ Cf. Siker, The sinlessness of Christ and human perfection (in this book), 8*.

²⁰ Siker, The sinlessness of Christ and human perfection (in this book), 11*.

²¹ Siker, The sinlessness of Christ and human perfection (in this book), 17*.

²² Siker, The sinlessness of Christ and human perfection (in this book), 26*.

characterize Jesus at any moment of his life. If the Bible says that Jesus was made to sin for us (2 Cor 5:21) or that he takes over our sins (1 Pet 2:24), it is true that Jesus experiences our self-alienation from God. But this does not imply that Jesus sinfully loses his communication with God (1 Pet 2:22). It only implies that Jesus includes even our darkest moments of self-alienation in the history of God.

Not to be able to admit sins in Jesus does not imply the impossibility of conceiving of sins in his life. Just remember how Kraschl argues for the sinlessness of Jesus without arguing for his infallibility or impeccability. In his contribution to this book, Kraschl introduces three possibilities to us how to conceive of Jesus as peccable, but sinless. The first model would simply say that the hypostatic union is broken when Jesus commits a sin. The second solution is dependent on the idea of middle knowledge that can be challenged. The third solution is “the *backward constitution view*” which is the favorite solution of Kraschl himself. This solution suggests that Jesus is elected as son of God at the end of his life because of his complete devotion to the divine will. At the same time, this election constitutes the hypostatic union backwards. Hence, Jesus is hypostatically unified with God from the first moment of his life because of his fidelity to God throughout his life; “only a human being whose life-testimony is cognisable as *the* real-symbol of God’s perfect love can be hypostatically united to the Logos.”²³

I do not want to discuss these three possibilities here, I only want to remind us that there are speculative solutions for the problem of how to conceive of a sinless, but peccable human person in hypostatic union with God. However such ontological explanations will of course be highly disputed. That is why some Muslim ways of argumentation for the impeccability or sinlessness of the prophets and Imams are so compelling for me. They do not develop ontological theories in order to explain the special status of these people, but they argue in purely pragmatic terms. Hence, what Christian theology should learn from the Muslim approach to impeccability is to be more focused on the soteriological basic of Christological claims and not to develop separated ontological discourses.

4. Conclusion

We have seen that there are parallel discourses on sinlessness and impeccability in Islam and Christianity. Each religion introduces the concept for different reasons. Whereas Christians need the sinlessness of Jesus for his ability to relate us to God, Muslims use the idea of impeccability for their concept of guidance through the prophets and Imams. However, there is some danger in this approach because the concepts of impeccability and inerrancy as a tool to explain guidance help to guide one to be perfect. This idea of perfection tends to lead to a concept of total obedience or surrender to human authority that can be easily misused in political contexts. If Muslims want to avoid this danger, they might try to rethink the idea of guidance and allow guidance only in certain respects and circumstances. This would mean that the idea of impeccability would be revised and even eliminated from Islamic theology. Modern exegesis of the Bible and of the Qur’an might argue that such an elimination can be easily harmonized with the words of scripture and that it will also be helpful to create a more coherent theology of revelation.

However, the case is different in Christianity. Although Christianity can revise the doctrine of the *impeccability* of Jesus, I do not see how it can be conceived of without the concept of the *sinlessness* of Jesus. Hence Christianity is more in need of this concept and cannot be as ‘modern’ as Islam here. Siker’s compelling suggestions for a more authentic, more human and more convincing approach to Jesus might be used by Muslims to explain their approach to Jesus and the prophets and help them to develop ideas that are more in harmony with modernity than the Christian ideas. Christianity still has

²³ Kraschl, Peccable as son of man, impeccable as son of God (in this book), 14*.

the central claim of the divinity of Christ which makes the idea of his separation from God through sin inconceivable. What Christians can learn from the Muslim way of reasoning is a more pragmatic account of their own theologizing. This will help them to recover the soteriological foundation of Christology and to avoid ontological meta-discussions that are no longer related to the salvific value of their beliefs. Hence the way of argumentation that we see in our volume also provides an important warning sign for analytic theology not to lose the connection to its soteriological basis.