

## **A Biblical Evaluation of Islamic and Catholic Soteriology**

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In presenting Islamic and Catholic soteriology, we come to look at two international monotheistic religions. This article is confined primarily to *The Qur'an*, *The Documents of Vatican II* (1963–1965), the latest *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994), and Pope John Paul II's Encyclicals. We will consider soteriology within the theological context of each religion. A biblical evaluation will follow the presentation of each soteriology, with a conclusion at the end. Our focus will be on the official position of each religion, recognizing that individuals within both religions may have a different experience.

### **Islamic Soteriology in Context**

The Koran (*Qur'an*) claims that Islam is the same religion given to Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus.<sup>1</sup> It alleges that God reveals truth in stages,<sup>2</sup> so it claims to be a “fuller explanation” of Scripture.<sup>3</sup> As such it is “scripture.”<sup>4</sup> It is a message for all the worlds.<sup>5</sup> The fuller explanation is about God. Angels came with inspiration to declare that God is one God. So the Koran proclaims the one God called Allah.<sup>6</sup> Jesus is removed from His role as Savior, so His ministry on earth, His death for all humanity, and His post-ascension intercessory ministry is

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<sup>1</sup>*The Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary*, by Abdullah Yusuf Ali (Elmhurst: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, 2001), 42.13, after as *Qur'an*. The poetic style with several lines for a sentence (including a capital letter for each new line) is not followed in this paper, but the exact words, with capitals removed, is the form in which the quotations appear.

<sup>2</sup>*Qur'an* 16.101, 17.106.

<sup>3</sup>*Qur'an* 10.37, cf. no distinction between the Books (3.84), cf. similarity with earlier scripture (46.10), “advance me in knowledge,” 814 (20.114), Muhammad is a “Warner” of a series of Warners of old (53.56), and all prophets are from God (2.136), after as *Qur'an*.

<sup>4</sup>*Qur'an* 34.31, cf. 37.37.

<sup>5</sup>*Qur'an* 38.87.

<sup>6</sup>*Qur'an* 2.163.

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replaced by presenting Him as only a human prophet. By contrast, Muhammad is said to be the final prophet who came to give this fuller revelation of God,<sup>7</sup> allegedly fuller than Christ's revelation. The Koran claims that Jesus predicted that Muhammad would come after Him.<sup>8</sup> The Koran says Muhammad is a "beautiful pattern (of conduct) for any one whose hope is in God and the Final Day."<sup>9</sup> His life is a model for those desirous of obtaining the good goal or eternity (a reward rather than a redemption).

**Christ is Not God.** The Koran says God is "too high" for any partners (like Christ and the Holy Spirit) to be with Him.<sup>10</sup> In fact, God curses those who think Christ is the Son of God, for there is only One God.<sup>11</sup> It is blasphemy to say God had a son, and those saying it will receive "the severest Penalty."<sup>12</sup> They will go to Hell.<sup>13</sup> In the meantime, Satan's authority is over them.<sup>14</sup>

The Koran demotes Jesus to one of the prophets.<sup>15</sup> It claims He did not die on the cross; it only looked like He did.<sup>16</sup> It claims Jesus was taken to God, and nothing is said about what He does.<sup>17</sup> So Islam is silent about Christ's post-ascension intercession in heaven. Islam claims Jesus will return again to earth in the end-time to complete His prophetic ministry and fight the anti-Christ.<sup>18</sup>

Yahiya Emerick, author and practicing Islamic believer, claims that "According to the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, Jesus will speak to the Christians and Jews of the world and convert them to Islam. He will succeed in breaking the worship of the cross and stop the eating of pork . . . Jesus will be the spiritual head of a transnational government of peace." This lasts for forty years, during which time Jesus marries, has children, dies, and is buried in Medina next to the grave of the prophet Muhammad.<sup>19</sup>

**God and Muhammad.** According to the Koran, Judgment is a summons to God and His Apostle Muhammad. "It is such as obey God and His Apostle, and fear God and do Right, that will win (In the end)."<sup>20</sup> The exhortation is, "establish regular Prayer and give regular Charity; and obey the Apostle; that ye may receive mercy."<sup>21</sup> In that day of Judgment, God "will call to them, and say:

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<sup>7</sup>*Qur'an*, 33.40.

<sup>8</sup>*Qur'an* 61.6.

<sup>9</sup>*Qur'an* 33.21.

<sup>10</sup>*Qur'an* 23.91–92.

<sup>11</sup>*Qur'an* 9.30.

<sup>12</sup>*Qur'an* 10.68–70.

<sup>13</sup>*Qur'an* 21.29.

<sup>14</sup>*Qur'an* 16.100.

<sup>15</sup>*Qur'an* 4.171; cf. an Apostle 5.75.

<sup>16</sup>*Qur'an* 4.157.

<sup>17</sup>*Qur'an* 4:157–158.

<sup>18</sup>Yahiya J. A. Emerick, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Understanding Islam* (Indianapolis: Pearson, 2002), 106–108, 206–207.

<sup>19</sup>Yahiya J. A. Emerick, 108–109.

<sup>20</sup>*Qur'an* 24.51–52, cf. 47.33.

<sup>21</sup>*Qur'an* 24.56).

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‘Where are My ‘partners’? Whom you imagined (to be such)?’<sup>22</sup> Yet “We shall reward Them . . .”<sup>23</sup> Note the plural “we,” which appears often. This is not Allah and Jesus or the Holy Spirit. This seems to be God and Muhammad, for often God and His Apostle are mentioned together, but other times it may be a plural used of the one God, for it is used even for Old Testament times.<sup>24</sup>

**Salvation by Works.** Salvation in Islam is not a gift. It has to be earned through vigorous works. The Koran says, “Do good; for God loveth those who do good.”<sup>25</sup> Charity “will remove from you some of your (stains of) evil.”<sup>26</sup> “Those who believe, and do deeds of righteousness, and establish regular prayers and regular charity, will have their reward with their Lord.”<sup>27</sup> “He will be their Friend, because they practised (righteousness).”<sup>28</sup> A person can “abound in merit.”<sup>29</sup> Every person “gets every good that it earns, and it suffers every ill that it earns.”<sup>30</sup> “Those who believe, and suffer exile and strive with might and main, in God’s cause, with their goods and their persons, have the highest rank in the sight of God: they are the people who will achieve (salvation).”<sup>31</sup>

Either the Garden or hell will reward each person. One has to merit entrance into either. “One Day every soul will come up struggling for itself, and every soul will be recompensed (fully) for all its actions, and none will be unjustly dealt with.”<sup>32</sup> “Those who do wish for the (things of) the Hereafter, and strive therefore with all due striving, and have Faith, they are the ones whose striving

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<sup>22</sup>*Qur’an* 28.62.

<sup>23</sup>*Qur’an* 39.7.

<sup>24</sup>Here are examples from the first seven Suras: Obey God and the Apostle, *Qur’an* 3.132, 4.59, 4.69, 5.92; He who obeys the Apostle obeys God (4.80); Go to hell if disobey God and His Apostle (4.14); Believe in God and His Apostle And the scripture which He hath sent to His Apostle (4.136); Those who reject our signs, we will cast into the fire (4.56); Come to what God hath revealed and to the Apostle (4.61). Often the plural is used of God, even though He is one: We sent down to thee the Book of truth (4.105); our Signs (5.10; 5.86; 6.39; 6.49; 6. 54; 6.68; 7.36); we appointed twelve captains in Israel (5.12); we ordained for the children of Israel (5.32); we revealed the Law to Moses (5.44); we ordained an eye for an eye (5.45); we sent Jesus the son of Mary (5.46); we have placed enmity among the Jews (5.64); if we did send down an angel (6.8); when suffering reached them from us (6.43); we send the apostles (6.48); our angels (6.61); we showed Abraham the power and laws of the heavens and earth (6.75); many “we” texts, (6.83, 84, 86, 87, 89, 94; 6.111, 112, 122, 123; 6.146; 6.152; 7.59, 65, 72, 73, 80, 83, 84, 94; 7.117, 130, 133, 136, 137, 138, 141, 142, 143, 160, 168, 171, 179); we created you, and made angels bow to Adam (7.11); our messengers of death (7.37). By contrast, “Our Apostle’s duty” seems to be written from the perspective of Moslems, rather than from the perspective of God or Muhammad (5.92).

<sup>25</sup>*Qur’an*, 2.195.

<sup>26</sup>*Qur’an* 2.271.

<sup>27</sup>*Qur’an* 2.277.

<sup>28</sup>*Qur’an* 6.127.

<sup>29</sup>*Qur’an* 11.3.

<sup>30</sup>*Qur’an* 2.286.

<sup>31</sup>*Qur’an* 9.20.

<sup>32</sup>*Qur’an* 16.111.

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is acceptable, (to God).”<sup>33</sup> Reward is in direct relation to endeavour.<sup>34</sup> “Then those whose balance (of good deeds) is heavy, they will attain salvation: but those whose balance is light, will be those who have lost their souls; in Hell will they abide.”<sup>35</sup>

Concerning the Garden, the Koran says, “enter ye the Garden, because of (the good) which ye did (in the world).”<sup>36</sup> The focus is on reward, not redemption. Hell is mentioned repeatedly throughout the Koran and often with the most lurid details. Although the reward is a Garden with streams running beneath it, and that is often mentioned, too, the fear of an eternal hell would be stimulus enough to cause devotees to try to save themselves. The Koran says, “Save yourselves and your families from a Fire”<sup>37</sup>

**Hell.** The Day of Judgment is often referred to throughout the Koran. God is “strict in punishment,”<sup>38</sup> for “severe is His chastisement.”<sup>39</sup> God says, “I will punish them with terrible agony in this world and in the hereafter, nor will they have anyone to help.”<sup>40</sup> In Hell, “As often as their skins are roasted through, we shall change them for fresh skins, that they may taste the Penalty.”<sup>41</sup> In the flames there will be nothing but “the heaving of sighs and sobs.”<sup>42</sup> There will be great thirst in Hell. But all they have is “boiling fetid water.” “Indeed ye shall drink like diseased camels raging with thirst!”<sup>43</sup> Focusing on one sufferer, the Koran says, “In gulps will he sip it, but never will he be near swallowing it down his throat: death will come to him from every quarter, yet will he not die: and in front of him will be a chastisement unrelenting.”<sup>44</sup> That unrelenting punishment for all in hell is described as follows. “And in the midst of boiling hot water will they wander round!”<sup>45</sup> “(They will be) in the midst of a fierce blast of Fire and in boiling water, and in shades of black smoke.”<sup>46</sup>

The inhabitants of Hell are engulfed in flames, with layers of fire above them and layers of fire beneath them.<sup>47</sup> God says, “Every time it shows abatement, we shall increase for them the fierceness of the Fire.”<sup>48</sup> (Note the plural “we” again). “For them will be cut out a garment of Fire: over their heads will

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<sup>33</sup>*Qur'an* 17.19.

<sup>34</sup>*Qur'an* 20.15.

<sup>35</sup>*Qur'an* 23.102.

<sup>36</sup>*Qur'an* 16.32.

<sup>37</sup>*Qur'an* 66.6.

<sup>38</sup>*Qur'an* 2.196; 2.211; 3.11; 4.2; 5.98.

<sup>39</sup>*Qur'an* 11.102.

<sup>40</sup>*Qur'an* 3.56.

<sup>41</sup>*Qur'an* 4.56.

<sup>42</sup>*Qur'an* 11.106. 21.100.

<sup>43</sup>*Qur'an* 56.55.

<sup>44</sup>*Qur'an* 14.16–17.

<sup>45</sup>*Qur'an* 55.44.

<sup>46</sup>*Qur'an* 56.42–43.

<sup>47</sup>*Qur'an* 39.16.

<sup>48</sup>*Qur'an* 17.97.

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be poured out boiling water. With it will be scalded what is within their bodies, as well as (their) skins. In addition there will be maces of iron (to punish) them. Every time they wish to get away therefrom, from anguish, they will be forced back therein, and (it will be said), “Taste ye the penalty of burning!”<sup>49</sup> Those in hell will cry to God to get out to work deeds of righteousness. But He tells them they must suffer for their past deeds, for there is no helper for wrongdoers.<sup>50</sup>

### **Biblical Evaluation**

The so-called fuller understanding of Scripture in the Koran does not live up to its claim. When Christ came to reveal the Father, He said, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). He did so as the God-man among humans. His ministry was an outpouring of God’s love to humans, and His death was the only way they could be saved. Christ taught that God so loved the world that He sent Him to be the Savior (John 3:16). To reject this revelation of God is not a fuller revelation of God, but an attempt to hide the truth about God.

The gift of salvation is denied, for according to Islam Christ did not die, and salvation can only be gained through a rigorous system of works. All the time devotees are focused on what they have to do for God rather than on what God has done for them. Rather than a fuller revelation of God, there is a revelation of one who is unlike God. His demands are heavy, with five times of prayer each day and other works to earn or merit heaven. Constantly believers are reminded of hell in the Koran. The horrors of that place and the unfairness of an eternal punishment for not doing enough good works reveals God as a tyrant. The fact that some in hell want to come out to do good deeds may suggest that they are not merely rebels, for such would curse God. To them God shows no compassion, but only a seeming delight in increasing the torture and keeping it going forever. I submit that the Moslem view of hell without Calvary gives such a distorted picture of God that the resulting system of human works for salvation is a counterfeit replacement for God’s gift of salvation.

### **Catholic Church**

*Vatican II* is a collection of sixteen documents. It is church-centered. It is the Church’s self-presentation of her nature and mission.<sup>51</sup> The collection is named *Lumen Gentium*, or “light of all nations.” The doctrine of salvation grows out of its understanding of the church. We will look at (1) the function of the Church, (2) the function of Mary, and (3) the function of religious practices.

**The Function of the Church.** All the documents of *Vatican II* (1963–1965) center on the church. There is a two-fold reality to the Church. First, it is the prolongation of the incarnation. As Pope John Paul II put it, “The

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<sup>49</sup>*Qur’an* 22.19–22.

<sup>50</sup>*Qur’an* 35.37.

<sup>51</sup>*The Documents of Vatican II*, Gen. ed., Walter M. Abbott S.J., trans. Joseph Gallagher (Wimbledon: Geoffrey Chapman, 1967), 15 (1.1.1), after as *Vatican II*.

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reality of the Incarnation finds a sort of extension *in the mystery of the Church—the Body of Christ*.<sup>52</sup> At the same time, “This is the unique Church of Christ which in the Creed we avow as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. After His Resurrection our Savior handed her (i.e., the Church) over to Peter to be shepherded (John. 21:17), commissioning him and the other apostles to propagate and govern her.”<sup>53</sup> So Catholic theology considers the Church the extension of Christ’s incarnational body throughout human history, and a body of Christ that is governed by an apostolic succession throughout human history. This apparently means the Pope and the Magisterium are invested with the continuance of Christ’s saving and priestly ministry. Hence, “Through the Church, we abide in Christ.”<sup>54</sup> “In that body, the life of Christ is poured into the believers who, through the sacraments, are united in a hidden and real way to Christ who suffered and was glorified.”<sup>55</sup> This is why confessions to God are made through priests, and Christ is dispensed through the sacraments. The Church and its priesthood stand between the believer and Christ.

The eternal Father plans to “assemble in the holy Church all those who would believe in Christ.”<sup>56</sup> The Church is universal,<sup>57</sup> and is “the kingdom of Christ now present in mystery.”<sup>58</sup> It is the “instrument” for achieving union with God and unity of humanity.<sup>59</sup> Christ made the Church “mystically into His own body. In that body, the life of Christ is poured into the believers, who, through the sacraments, are united in a hidden and real way to Christ . . .”<sup>60</sup> “In pursuit of her divine mission, the Church preaches the gospel to all men and dispenses the treasures of grace.”<sup>61</sup>

The Eucharist is the central way of dispensing salvation. *Vatican II* expresses it as follows: “As often as the sacrifice of the cross in which ‘Christ, our passover, has been sacrificed’ (1 Cor 5:7) is celebrated on an altar, the work of our redemption is carried on. At the same time, in the sacrament of the Eucharistic bread the unity of all believers who form one body in Christ (cf. 1 Cor 10:17) is both expressed and brought about.”<sup>62</sup> The priest, “[a]cting in the person of Christ” . . . “brings about the Eucharistic Sacrifice, and offers it to God . . .”<sup>63</sup> The priest “alone can complete the building up of the Body in the

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<sup>52</sup>*The Encyclicals of John Paul II*, ed. J. Michael Miller, C.S.B. (Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor, 1996), 357 (*Redemptoris Mater*, 4)

<sup>53</sup>*Vatican II*, 23 (1.1.8), parenthesis supplied.

<sup>54</sup>*The Documents of Vatican II*, 19 (1.19).

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*, 20 (1.1.7).

<sup>56</sup>*Vatican II*, 15 (1.1.2).

<sup>57</sup>*Vatican II*, 16 (1.1.2).

<sup>58</sup>*Vatican II*, 16 (1.1.3).

<sup>59</sup>*Vatican II*, 15 (1.1.1).

<sup>60</sup>*Vatican II*, 20–23 (1.1.7–8).

<sup>61</sup>*Vatican II*, 303 (4.5.89).

<sup>62</sup>*Vatican II*, 16 (1.1.3).

<sup>63</sup>*Vatican II*, 27 (1.2.10).

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Eucharistic Sacrifice.”<sup>64</sup> “For it is the function of the Church, led by the Holy Spirit who renews and purifies her ceaselessly, to make God the Father and His Incarnate Son present and in a sense visible.”<sup>65</sup>

Bishops “channel the fullness of Christ’s holiness.” Through the sacraments “they sanctify the faithful.”<sup>66</sup> The Church can even be called “the universal sacrament of salvation.”<sup>67</sup> This is because Christ is present in the Church. The Church “receives from him ‘the fullness of the means of salvation.’”<sup>68</sup>

The function of the Church is similar to the function of Mary. Both give birth to God’s Child or children. Just as the Holy Spirit gave birth to Christ through Mary, so He continues to give birth to Christians through Mother Church. *Vatican II* states,

The Church, moreover, contemplating Mary’s mysterious sanctity, initiating her charity, and faithfully fulfilling the Father’s will, becomes herself a mother by accepting God’s word in faith. For by her preaching and by baptism she brings forth to a new and immortal life children who are conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of God. The Church herself is a virgin, who keeps whole and pure the fidelity she has pledged to her Spouse. Imitating the Mother of her Lord, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, she preserves with virginal purity an integral faith, a firm hope, and a sincere charity.<sup>69</sup>

**The Function of Mary.** In his opening message to the Vatican Council, Pope John XXIII began by saying, “Mother Church rejoices today that, by the singular gift of Divine Providence, the longed-for day has finally dawned when under the auspices of the virgin Mother of God, whose maternal dignity is commemorated on this feast—the Second Vatican Council is being solemnly opened here beside St. Peter’s tomb.”<sup>70</sup> Near the end of his speech he implored, “O Mary, Help of Christians, Help of Bishops, of whose love we have recently had particular proof in thy temple of Loreto, where we venerated the mystery of the Incarnation, dispose all things for a happy and propitious outcome and, with thy spouse, St. Joseph, the holy Apostles Peter and Paul, St. John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist, intercede for us to God.”<sup>71</sup>

The Council examined the role of the Virgin Mary in the economy of salvation. In Christ’s ministry on earth she did not have a passive role, but cooperated in the work of human salvation and was united with Christ in His saving work. Even at the cross, “There she united herself with a maternal heart to

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<sup>64</sup>*Vatican II*, 36 (1.2.17).

<sup>65</sup>*Vatican II*, 219 (41.21).

<sup>66</sup>*Vatican II*, 51 (1.3.26).

<sup>67</sup>*Vatican II*, 79 (1.7.48).

<sup>68</sup>*Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Liguori: Liguori, 1994), 220 (830), after as *Catechism*.

<sup>69</sup>*Vatican II*, 92–93 (1.8.64).

<sup>70</sup>*Vatican II*, 710.

<sup>71</sup>*Vatican II*, 719.

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His sacrifice, and lovingly consented to the immolation of this Victim which she herself had brought forth.”<sup>72</sup> She was “united with Him in suffering as He died on the cross.”<sup>73</sup> Pope John Paul II, in his second Encyclical, says, “No one has experienced, to the same degree as the Mother of the Crucified One, the mystery of the Cross, the overwhelming encounter of divine transcendent justice with love: that ‘kiss’ given by mercy and justice.” She entered an “incomparable sharing in the messianic mission of her Son.”<sup>74</sup>

Catholic theology claims that unlike all other humans, Mary was not born with a sinful nature; nor did she sin. The *Catechism* says that “Mary benefited first of all and uniquely from Christ’s victory over sin: she was preserved from all stain of original sin and by special grace committed no sin of any kind during her whole earthly life.”<sup>75</sup> The Council said Mary was “preserved free from all guilt of original sin, was immaculate, and taken up body and soul into heaven.” There she “was exalted by the Lord as Queen of all, in order that she might be the more thoroughly conformed to her Son, the Lord of Lords . . .”<sup>76</sup> “Queen of all” is translated “Queen of the Universe” in Pope John Paul II’s sixth Encyclical.<sup>77</sup> *Vatican II* says that in heaven, she does “not lay aside this saving role, but by her manifold acts of intercession continues to win for us gifts of eternal salvation.” No wonder the Church gives her the titles of “Advocate, Auxiliatrix, Adjutrix, and Mediatrix.”<sup>78</sup>

Although Catholic theology says that Mary has a subordinate role to Christ,<sup>79</sup> yet it is Mary who is uplifted as their “exalted model.”<sup>80</sup> Moreover,

in the most holy Virgin, the Church has already reached that perfection whereby she exists without spot or wrinkle. Yet the followers of Christ still strive to increase in holiness by conquering sin. And so they raise their eyes to Mary who shines forth to the whole community of the elect as a model of the virtues. Devotedly meditating on her and contemplating her in the light of the Word made man, the Church with reverence enters more intimately into the supreme mystery of the Incarnation and becomes ever increasingly like her Spouse.<sup>81</sup>

Pope John Paul II says Mary

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<sup>72</sup>*Vatican II*, 89–90 (1.8.58).

<sup>73</sup>*Vatican II*, 91 (1.8.61).

<sup>74</sup>*Encyclicals*, 133 (*Dives in Misericordia*, 9.2; 9.3).

<sup>75</sup>*Catechism*, 104 (411).

<sup>76</sup>*Vatican II*, 90 (1.8.59).

<sup>77</sup>*Encyclicals*, 397 (*Redemptoris Mater*, 41.1).

<sup>78</sup>*Vatican II*, 91 (1.8.62).

<sup>79</sup>*Vatican II*, 92 (1.8.62).

<sup>80</sup>*Vatican II*, 93 (1.8.65).

<sup>81</sup>*Vatican II*, *Ibid.*



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is the one who has the deepest knowledge of the mystery of God's mercy. She knows its price, she knows how great it is. In this sense, we call her the *Mother of Mercy*: our Lady of Mercy, or Mother of Divine Mercy; in each one of these titles there is a deep theological meaning, for they express the special preparation of her soul, of her whole personality, so that she was able to perceive, through the complex events, first of Israel, then of every individual and of the whole of humanity, that mercy of which 'from generation to generation' people become sharers according to the eternal design of the Most Holy Trinity.<sup>82</sup>

Mary is not only a type of the Church,<sup>83</sup> but is considered the "Mother of the Church." Because the Church is the Body of Christ and the prolongation of the incarnation, Mary is looked to as the mother of the Church, just as she is mother of Christ. *Vatican II* exhorts Catholics to be devoted to Mary and honor her with "special reverence." For in "all perils and needs, the faithful have fled prayerfully to her protection."<sup>84</sup> *Vatican II* urges that veneration of images of the Blessed Virgin, together with those of Christ and the saints, be "religiously observed."<sup>85</sup>

As the Mother of God, Mother of the Church, and Queen of Heaven, Mary allegedly intercedes in heaven. *Vatican II* calls upon Catholics to "pour forth persevering prayer to the Mother of God and Mother of men. Let them implore that she who aided the beginnings of the Church by her prayers may now, exalted as she is in heaven above all the saints and angels, intercede with her Son in the fellowship of all the saints."<sup>86</sup>

Besides her intercession in heaven, Mary evidently has a major role in getting the gospel of salvation to the world. The Document on Missions ends with the Fathers and the Roman Pontiff praying that "through the intercession of the Virgin Mary, Queen of the Apostles, the nations may be led to the knowledge of the truth as soon as possible . . ."<sup>87</sup>

**The Function of Religious Practices.** The *Catechism* devotes seventy-four pages to "Christian Prayer." It speaks of the Church's prayer to the "holy Mother of God." There are two movements to these prayers: "the first 'magnifies the Lord' for the 'great things' he did for his lowly servant and through her for all human beings; the second entrusts the supplications and praises of the children of God to the Mother of Jesus, because she now knows the humanity which, in her, the Son of God espoused."<sup>88</sup> Both movements have to do with Mary.

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<sup>82</sup>*Encyclicals*, 133, (*Dives in Misericordia*, 9.3).

<sup>83</sup>*Catechism*, 252 (967).

<sup>84</sup>*Vatican II*, 94 (1.8.66).

<sup>85</sup>*Vatican II*, 95 (1.8.67).

<sup>86</sup>*Vatican II*, 96 (1.8.69).

<sup>87</sup>*Vatican II*, 630 (13.6.14).

<sup>88</sup>*Catechism*, 642–643 (2675).

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For Catholics, praying the rosary is an integral part life. Traditionally it has consisted of fifty small beads in a circle. Four large beads divide the smaller beads into equal sections. On the large beads is said the Lord's Prayer (four recitations), but the fifty small beads are for prayers to the Virgin Mary. Doing the rosary calls for three repetitions of the fifty-four prayers. Mary is central to the rosary. It is of interest that prayer beads are an ancient practice, probably used first by Buddhists. Today Buddhists, Moslems, and Catholics use them.<sup>89</sup> Although the Catechism says, "Christian prayer tries above all to meditate on the mysteries of Christ" as in the rosary,<sup>90</sup> it also says devotion to the Blessed Virgin is intrinsic to Christian worship." She is honored as Mother of God "to whose protection the faithful fly in all their dangers and needs." The rosary is called "Marian prayer" and the "epitome of the whole Gospel," expressing devotion to the Virgin Mary.<sup>91</sup>

On October 22, 2002, to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of *Vatican II*, and to begin his 25<sup>th</sup> year as Pope, John Paul II released his Encyclical *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*. He noted that the rosary is the "very heart of Christian life." Mary obtains for the faithful "the abundance of the gifts of the Holy Spirit." It is through her intercession that the Holy Spirit is poured out, and by her intercession she obtains things from the heart of her Son. The Pope says "to pray the rosary is to hand over our burdens to the merciful hearts of Christ and his Mother." He affirms, "although the repeated Hail Mary is addressed directly to Mary, it is to Jesus that the act of love is ultimately directed, with her and through her." Note that at best Mary comes between the believer and Christ. The Pope mentions that the church grants indulgences to those who cite the rosary. The Pope adds to the Rosary meditation works of Christ during His public ministry, but says nothing of His present intercessory ministry in heaven. But he has much to say about the intercession of Mary.<sup>92</sup>

The Pope concludes by saying,

May this appeal of mine not go unheard! At the start of the twenty-fifth year of my Pontificate, I entrust this Apostolic Letter to the loving hands of the Virgin Mary, prostrating myself in spirit before her image in the splendid Shrine built for her by Blessed Bartolo Longo, the apostle of the Rosary. I willingly make my own the touching words with which he concluded his well-known supplication to the Queen of the Holy Rosary: "Rosary of Mary, sweet chain which unites us to God, bond of love which unites us to the angels, tower of salvation against the assaults of Hell, safe port in our universal shipwreck, we will never abandon you. You will be our comfort in the hour of death: yours our final kiss as life ebbs away. And the last word from our lips will be your sweet name, O Queen of the Rosary

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<sup>89</sup>*World Book Encyclopedia* (Chicago: Field Enterprises, 1973), 16:437.

<sup>90</sup>*Catechism*, 650 (2708).

<sup>91</sup>*Catechism*, 253 (971).

<sup>92</sup>Cited from the Encyclical on the web site [www.newadvent.org/docs/jp02rd.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/docs/jp02rd.htm).

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of Pompeii, O dearest Mother, O Refuge of Sinners, O Sovereign Consoler of the Afflicted. May you be everywhere blessed, today and always, on earth and in heaven.”

Even though in *Vatican II* and the *Catechism* there is mention of Christ as the sole mediator, it is not without Mary’s intercession being given prominent place. The *Catechism* says of Mary, because “she gives us Jesus, her son, Mary is Mother of God and our mother; we can entrust all our cares and petitions to her: she prays for us as she prayed for herself. ‘Let it be to me according to your word.’ By entrusting ourselves to her prayer, we abandon ourselves to the will of God together with her: ‘Thy will be done.’”<sup>93</sup> At best Mary’s intercession is linked with Christ’s. Christ’s intercession does not stand alone without the need of Mary’s intercession.

In fact, Mary is the focus of prayer throughout life.

By asking Mary to pray for us, we acknowledge ourselves to be poor sinners and we address ourselves to the ‘Mother of Mercy,’ the All-Holy One. We give ourselves over to her now, in the Today of our lives. And our trust broadens further, already at the present moment, to surrender ‘the hour of our death’ wholly to her care. May she be there as she was at her son’s death on the cross. May she welcome us as our mother at the hour of our passing to lead us to her son, Jesus, in paradise.<sup>94</sup>

The Church believes Mary is more than the Mother of the Church, for she “has become the mother of all the living.” It seems that because she gave birth to Christ, she is elevated to being the Mother of God, and as such, the Mother of all humans.

Besides Mary, there are the saints, selected by the Church, that also intercede in heaven. “Their intercession is their most exalted service to God’s plan. We can and should ask them to intercede for us and for the whole world.”<sup>95</sup> The Church is the place “for adoration of the real presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament,” and pilgrimages are “very special occasions for renewal in prayer.”<sup>96</sup>

**Biblical Evaluation**

**Church as Bride of Christ.** Although Catholic theology presents Christ’s life, death and intercession, it adds to the biblical data. Nowhere in Scripture is the Church likened to Mary, as a Mother to Christians as Mary was to Christ. Rather, Scripture likens the church to the bride of Christ (Hos 2:19; Jer 3:14; 2 Cor 11:2). Christ is the head of the church (Col 1:18). The Holy Spirit is the great Administrator of the early church (Acts 2:33; 4:31; 6:10; 7:55; 8:15–17,

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<sup>93</sup>*Catechism*, 643 (2677).

<sup>94</sup>*Catechism*, 644 (2677).

<sup>95</sup>*Catechism*, 645 (2683).

<sup>96</sup>*Catechism*, 647 (2691).

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29, 39; 9:17, 31; 10:19–20, 44; 11:15, 24; 13:2, 9, 52; 15:28; 19:6; 20:22–23; 21:11) and Christ is the only Mediator between God and humans (1 Tim 2:5; Heb 8:6; 9:15; 12:24), which leaves no room for Mary and the saints interceding, even in a subordinate role.

**No Special Status to Mary.** On one occasion when Jesus was talking to the crowd, someone told him that his mother and brothers wanted to speak to Him. “He replied, ‘Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?’ Pointing to his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother’” (Matt 12:47–50). Clearly He did not consider His mother any different from others who do the will of His Father. At the marriage in Cana, when the wine ran out, and his mother told Him about that, He answered, “‘Dear woman, why do you involve me? . . . My time has not yet come’” (John 2:4).

There is no biblical statement from Christ that Mary had a unique and inseparable part of His saving ministry. Just because He was born through Mary did not give her a privileged status. The choice of Mary was no different from the choice of Israel in the Old Testament, or the choice of the Church in the New Testament. All these chosen avenues were sinful humans needing salvation, and as such God uses them. As sinners all are totally dependent upon Him for salvation. “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

**All Humans are Sinners, Including Mary.** Scripture is clear that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). This includes Mary. There is no biblical basis for an immaculate conception and a sinless life of Mary. It follows that there is no biblical support for Mary as a type of the Church, with the Church allegedly virginal and immaculate. There is no biblical basis that Mary ascended to heaven at her death to become the Queen of Heaven. The only queen of Heaven mentioned in Scripture provoked God to anger. She was a part of Judah’s theology when truth perished (Jer 7:17–28; cf. 44:17–30). The Queen of Heaven was a counterfeit god, prayed to by Judah in its rebellion against the only true God. Isaiah and Jeremiah were sent by God to warn Judah of its false theology.

If Mary really was the Queen of Heaven, she would be an addition to the Kings, the royal three of the Trinity. In fact, if she is able to hear the prayers of believers around the world, and be present with them in life, represent them to the Son, and help them at the moment of death, and lead them to Jesus, then she must have the gift of omnipresence that is a prerogative of God alone. Mary would have to be divine to be able to do what Catholic theology says she does. The way Mary is adored and prayed to deflects attention away from the only Savior-Intercessor and comes between the believer and Christ. There is a striking parallel between Judah’s apostate adoration of the Queen of Heaven and that of the Catholic church.

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**Christ was Sacrificed Once Only.** Scripture says Christ “appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself” (Heb 9:26). “Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people” (Heb 9:28). The focus on “once” (*hapax*) means it was not necessary to repeat it, yet the Eucharist as defined and celebrated is a repetition of Calvary. It is the priest creating and crucifying Christ. Whether realized or not, this unending sacrifice of Christ, at the will of priests, calls in radical question the once-for-all unique sacrifice of Calvary. It cheapens it and fails to comprehend the enormity of the all-availing sacrifice of Christ. Just as Christ’s intercession means there is no need for others in heaven to intercede, so His sacrifice does not require others to sacrifice Him again and again. Just as other human intercessors in heaven deflect attention from the intercession of Christ and come between Christ and believers, so His repetitious sacrifice in the Mass deflects attention from His once-for-all sacrifice at Calvary and comes between Christ and believers.

It isn’t only the ministry of Christ that has been handed over to the Church, but Christ Himself, for it is priests of the Church that allegedly make Christ present in the bread and the wine (Transubstantiation). No wonder Catholics worship the host as Christ. Here the emblem of Christ’s body comes between the believer and the risen Christ.

Scripture is clear that one act of Adam brought sin to all humans and one act of Christ (Calvary) brought salvation to all humans (Rom 5:18). “For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive” (1 Cor 15:21–22). However, not all will receive the gift of salvation (Rom 5:19): only the “whosoever believeth in Him” of John 3:16 will not perish. Scripture says, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Acts 2:21). Jesus said, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).

**Christ as Only Mediator Between God and Humans.**<sup>97</sup> In Scripture there is no place given to the intercession of Mary and saints. This is why the Book of Hebrews says so much about Christ’s post-ascension intercession in heaven.

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<sup>97</sup>This article does not discuss the biblical view of death, although it is germane to the topic. For if the dead do not live on after death, then Mary and the saints are dead. Scripture says the dead sleep (Dan 12:2), they know nothing (Eccl 9:5), their thoughts have perished (Ps 146:4), they have no love, hatred, or jealousy (Eccl 9:6), and they will be resurrected at Christ’s return, and not precede the living to heaven (1 Thes 4:16–18). This is why Christ promised to come and get his people in the second advent (John 14:1–3). God alone is immortal (1 Tim 6:16), and the saints do not have innate immortality, but receive immortality in their resurrection, not at death (1 Cor 15:53–54). Satan’s first lie to Eve was that she would not die (Gen 3:4), but sin brought death (Rom 6:23), not a continuance of living after dying. If life was a natural transference to further living because of innate immortality, then Calvary would not be necessary, and hence the doctrine of salvation would be irrelevant. Calvary gifted forgiven sinners with future eternal life (Rom 5:18–19), even though eternal life in Christ now abides within (John 3:36). For more, see Norman R. Gulley, *Christ is Coming!* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 1998), 276–298.

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Never once are Mary or the saints mentioned. In fact, the keyword of Hebrews is “better.” Christ’s intercession is better than Old Testament priests who interceded prior to Christ’s coming. The intercessions of Catholic priests, Mary, and saints have no meaning after Christ’s better intercession has come. In fact, no other person can intercede in heaven, for the prerequisite for Christ’s intercession in heaven is His death. “Having obtained salvation, with His own blood, He entered once for all into the holy places” (my translation, Heb 9:12, cf. 7:27).<sup>98</sup> This is why Hebrews speaks of His sacrifice as better than the sacrifices of Old Testament priests. Calvary authenticates Christ’s intercession. No human intercessors qualify.

Another prerequisite for Christ’s intercession in heaven was His suffering human temptations. “Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted” (Heb 2:18). “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (Heb 4:15–16). Christ fully understands and doesn’t need humans to help him. Note how the believer has direct access to Christ’s intercession. The believer does not need to go through priests, the Church, Mary, or saints. Christ opened up this direct access, which was not present when Old Testament priests interceded. Any return to a pre-crucifixion status of priests fails to comprehend the new reality in Christ’s life and death.

Christ has “a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them. Such a high priest meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens” (Heb 7:25–26). Clearly Christ meets the need of humans and does not need any help from other human intercessors, even if they were qualified, which they are not. Christ promised, “You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it” (John 14:14). Paul affirmed, “My God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus” (Phil 4:19). The Holy Spirit makes this possible, not human intercessors. “We do not know what we ought to pray, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God’s will” (Rom 8:26–27). Clearly the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, divine authors of salvation, are the only Ones able to help sinners. No human sinner can contribute anything.

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<sup>98</sup>Just as Jewish priests needed a sacrifice to offer in their work in the sanctuary (Heb 8:3), which was a type of Christ, so Christ needed His own sacrifice. He entered the holy places (*ta hagia*: not confined to the Most Holy place; NKJV, NIV, Phillips; or to the Holy place, KJV, RSV, NASB).

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The very thought of other intercessors reveals a failure to comprehend the love of Christ for humans, the love of the Father who gave His Son for the world, and the love of the Holy Spirit who intercedes for us. There is no member of the Godhead who needs human intercessors. Christ once said He would not need to pray to the Father to get Him to love people, because He already does (John 16:26–27). Hebrews says, “If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” (Rom 8:31–32). Christ’s high priestly intercession rebukes Satan the accuser of humans (Zech 3:1–7).<sup>99</sup> The Catholic view of Mary putting in a good word to Christ fails to comprehend the all-sufficiency of the words of a Savior-Advocate and the Holy Spirit-Intercessor. Christ “is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who can separate us from the love of Christ?” (Rom 8:34–35). Paul lists a number of things that attempt to separate the believer from Christ. He concludes that nothing “will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:39). For the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit love each member of the human race. The idea of human intercessors fails to comprehend the depth of this love, and such a failure ends up separating many sincere Catholics from God by approaching Him through human mediators. Why cling to Mary and the saints and flee to them for help, throughout life and even in death, when the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the only ones who can help them?

**Biblical Soteriology Jettisoned.** The greatest need for Catholic soteriology is to believe in the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ and cling to that death, and not to representations of it in every Mass. Further, their greatest need is to look to Christ in His present mediatorial work of intercession in heaven, rather than cling to alleged intercessions of Mary and saints in heaven and intercessions of priests on earth. The confessional is confessing to a priest instead of confessing to Christ as High Priest (Heb 4:16). Dispensing of Christ through the Eucharist is receiving Christ through priests rather than through the Holy Spirit (John 14:15–18). The Eucharist, Mary, saints, and the Church all come between the only Savior of humans and those who have accepted Him.

**Foundational Problem: The Place of Scripture in Catholic Theology.** Although many true biblical and gospel insights are found in Vatican II, the *Catechism*, and the *Encyclicals* of John Paul II, they are negated by the additional human ideas that are mixed with them. This should come as no surprise, as the Church places human traditions as equal with divine revelation in *Vatican II*. It says, “there exists a close connection and communication between sacred tradition and sacred Scripture. For both of them, flowing from the same divine wellspring, in a certain way merge into a unity and tend toward the same

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<sup>99</sup>Note in Zechariah 3, the intercession is on behalf of Joshua, and in opposition to Satan his accuser. This is an insight (type) into the cosmic controversy, where Christ stands up for His people. “For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb . . .” (Rev 12:10–11a).

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end.”<sup>100</sup> Note that tradition is called sacred and is placed before Scripture. This is no accident, for hermeneutically it is tradition that interprets Scripture in Catholic theology. This is why the non-biblical additions are found in their doctrine of salvation.

*Vatican II* says, the “task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ.”<sup>101</sup> By contrast, Scripture has a role in interpreting itself (*sola scriptura*) and reveals Christ as upholding Scripture (Matt 4:22, 31–42; Luke 24:27). His teaching unfolded the intent of Scripture, rather than adding to it and changing it, as is done in Catholic tradition. As seen above, Scripture upholds Christ as the only mediator between God and humans because He alone died as their sacrifice.

The second document of *Vatican II* is about revelation. It is significant that the document on the church precedes the document on revelation, rather than the other way round. The document on revelation states that the apostles left bishops to succeed them, handing over to them their teaching role in order to keep the gospel whole and alive in the Church for all time. Hence, this sacred tradition and sacred Scripture are like a mirror in which the pilgrim Church on earth looks at God, from whom she has received everything, until she is finally brought to see Him face to face (cf. 1 John 3:2).<sup>102</sup> Here the teaching role of the bishops is put on the same level as that of the apostles, yet human traditions are mixed with their teaching. Yet it is from that mixed teaching that bishops look at God, rather than seeing Him fully and adequately revealed in Scripture.

So the responsibility of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on, is entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church, which exercises its authority in the name of Christ. The document claims that this teaching office is not above the word of God, for it serves it by teaching only what has been handed on. It listens to it devoutly, guarding it meticulously, and explaining it faithfully by its divine commission and by help from the Holy Spirit. It draws from this one deposit of faith the divine revelation which it presents for belief.<sup>103</sup> But this apparent obedience to the Word is not the final word, “for all of what has been said about the way of interpreting Scripture is subject finally to the judgment of the Church, which carries out the divine commission and ministry of guarding and interpreting the word of God.”<sup>104</sup>

The central fact is the continued rejection of the sole authority of Scripture or the *sola scriptura* principle of the Reformers. If interpretation of Scripture is under the judgment of the church, then any interpretation in the future could

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<sup>100</sup>*Vatican II*, 117 (2.1.9).

<sup>101</sup>*Vatican II*, 117–118 (2.2.10).

<sup>102</sup>*Vatican II*, 115 (2.2.1).

<sup>103</sup>*Vatican II*, 117–118 (2.2.10).

<sup>104</sup>*Vatican II*, 117–121 (2.2.10–2.3.12).



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issue from that premise. The fact that Catholic tradition is placed on par with Scripture, and even called the word of God and looked to as judge over the meaning of Scripture, clearly suggests that Catholic theology maintains church authority over biblical authority, the premise against which the Reformers revolted in the sixteenth century. So at the foundational level the Catholic Church remains unchanged.

The problem with putting the church, human reason, or feelings in authority is that they tend to take the place of Scripture as authority and overlook the evaluation of humans as found in Scripture. Humans are by nature finite, whereas God is infinite. Because humans are finite, they need to receive input from the Infinite. Humans, left to their own reason, feeling, or church organization, are still in the realm of the finite. Furthermore, humans are not only finite but sinners. Finiteness and sinfulness are two reasons humankind need an authority outside of itself, either individually or collectively. Humanity needs God and His infinite, trustworthy self-revelation in Scripture.

The Reformers battled against the authority of the church. The church claimed to be the ultimate authority in deciding about Scripture, both in choosing which books were canonical and how they should be interpreted. By contrast, Calvin speaks of the “full authority” of Scripture as from God and, as such, Scripture should be believed as if one had heard God speak its words from heaven.<sup>105</sup> Luther said, “I put my confidence in no other faith, but in the Word of God.”<sup>106</sup> They revolted against the external human authority of the church, which had rejected the innate authority of Scripture.

If Scripture is emptied of the Word of God, at least the church is filled with Him—even though both are under the supervision of an infallible Magisterium. Relative to infallibility of the church, *Vatican II* says Christ willed His Church to be endowed with infallibility to define a doctrine of faith and morals from the deposit of divine revelation, which it must religiously guard and faithfully interpret. This is the infallibility the Pope enjoys by virtue of his office.<sup>107</sup> Revelation is removed from Scripture and is made present in an interpreter. This means authority has vacated Scripture and taken up residence in the pope.

Basic to the Church as authority is the idea that the Church is the prolongation of the incarnation through history. This means that Jesus Christ is ontologically present in the Church and that what it does and decides is the work of Jesus Christ. So Christ can be ontologically present in the church but not logically present in Scripture. Authority has moved from the canon to the church.

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<sup>105</sup>Calvin, *Institutes*, 68–69 (1.7.1).

<sup>106</sup>Martin Luther, *Luther's Works: Table Talk*, vol. 54 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), 193.

<sup>107</sup>*Vatican II*, 48 (1.3.25).

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**Islamic and Catholic Soteriology Compared**

Muhammad is a model for Moslems as Mary is for Catholics, whereas Christ is the model for Christians in Scripture. Both Islamic and Catholic theology share a foundational shift away from Scripture. Both have the same hermeneutic, in that human ideas are placed above divine revelation. Muhammad claims to have a fuller revelation than found in Scripture, and the Magisterium claims to have the final understanding of Scripture. The good news of the gospel as a free gift is absent in both. Muhammad denies that Christ died; the Magisterium denies the once-for-allness of Christ's death. Muhammad places human works in place of Christ's gift of salvation, and the Magisterium places human works in place of Christ's death. Muhammad has nothing to say about Christ's intercession in heaven; the Magisterium has much to say about alleged human intercessors in heaven. The Koran and the Catholic Church come between Christ and humans.

One could argue that Moslems pray directly to Allah, whereas Catholics pray indirectly through Mary and the saints allegedly interceding for them. Nevertheless, this doesn't change their works oriented ways to merit salvation. One could also argue that belief in a Trinity among Catholics is better than belief in only one God among Moslems. But this doesn't change the fact that either the Three or the One do not gift salvation.

These two international monotheistic religions are preoccupied more with what humans have to do for God than with what God has done and does for humans. The result is a system of works to earn salvation in both. In different ways, both fail to give proper place to Christ and Calvary in their soteriology. In fairness, it should be said that even those who claim to be evangelicals can also do the same, which points out the importance of the substitutionary atonement that the Evangelical Theological and Adventist Theological Societies proclaims as essential to the gospel.

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