

## **Dr. Bahnsen Represents Christianity in Dialogue with Islam and Judaism at Orange Coast College**

*By Dr. Greg Bahnsen*

The "Visiting Scholar in Residence Series" at Orange Coast College this fall featured an exchange between representatives of the three major religions from the Middle East: Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

SCCCS was invited to have its own scholar in residence, Dr. Bahnsen, represent the Christian viewpoint. On October 15, there was a two and a half hour public dialogue, with about 750 people in the audience. Each speaker made a major presentation and later offered a brief response to the other two presentations. On October 16 a panel comprised of two professors and a L.A. Times religion writer cross-examined the three religious scholars for two more hours.

Dr. Bahnsen's strategy was to observe that both Judaism and Islam recognize the divine inspiration of the Torah and most of the Old Testament. (In witnessing to Muslims, Christians need to realize that the Koran honors the writings of Moses, David, etc. as previous revelation.) Therefore, on that common basis, the three religions can objectively judge which theological perspective is divinely authorized.

It turned out that the other two scholars shied away from doing exegetical theology and from arguing with Dr. Bahnsen on the basis of the Biblical text. Many in the audience observed this. Many in the audience also heard a clear presentation of the Christian gospel in Dr. Bahnsen's apologetic - Jesus is the promised Messiah, and salvation is not by good works, but rather by faith in the redemptive work of the Messiah.

In his response to the Muslim scholar, Dr. Bahnsen argued that the Koran claims to be the inscription of an eternal book in heaven, and yet later portions of the Koran "abrogate" earlier ones. He argued that the Bible - which Muslims say they accept - teaches that later revelations from God must conform with previous revelations. Moreover, the Koran claims to be continuous with the Bible and a confirmation of it. Yet there are clearly contradictions between the two books (for instance, regarding Christ's deity, His dying on the cross, etc.). Likewise, there are numerous conflicts between Biblical stories and the Koranic versions of them.

There are also embarrassing historical errors in the Koran (for instance, the mother of Jesus is called the sister of Aaron: "Mary" becomes "Miriam"). Further, there are contradictions right within the Koran itself (for instance, all of Noah's family is said to be saved through the flood, but one of Noah's sons is elsewhere said to have drowned in the flood).

Dr. Bahnsen argued that the Islamic doctrine of "tanzih" (or transcendence) - which says that no human language can positively describe Allah because he is allegedly "incomparable" (Surah 42:11) - would render it logically impossible for the Koran to be what it claims to be, a positive revelation and description of Allah.

The following text comes from the concluding section of Dr. Bahnsen's major presentation delivered during the first evening of dialogue:

"Neither Judaism nor Islam have an anointed one or Messiah who fulfills the anticipation of the Old Testament scriptures, even though they acknowledge them to be God's inspired self-revelation. For this reason the theologies of Judaism and Islam lack material adequacy: they do not do justice to the message of God's revealed word. That is why we look upon them as heretical versions of the Biblical faith, versions which do not deliver good news to mankind.

Following upon their failure to affirm the promised Messiah, Judaism and Islam cannot proclaim an assured word of salvation to those who know that they stand guilty before a holy and just God. Christianity is uniquely the religion of salvation by grace through faith in the finished work of the Christ.

Paul puts it in these words: "For by grace are you saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). Christianity teaches that Christ paid the price of sin, and that through faith in Him and His saving work, men may be forgiven by God. They cannot earn this forgiveness by good works, nor can they take any credit before God. Salvation comes as a gift, appropriated by faith, rather than meritorious good deeds.

Judaism and Islam cannot and do not teach such good news about grace and salvation. By not trusting in the work of God's Messianic Son for redemption, both Judaism and Islam are in their own distinctive ways committed to some form of works-righteousness or legalism. They are left to seek a right standing before God through imperfectly good works performed in human wisdom and strength.

The Apostle Paul knew the burden and bondage of such a futile approach unto God. Those who attempt such do not properly comprehend the high demands of God's personal holiness, as set forth in His perfect law. Paul says that before the law of God "every mouth may be stopped" (Romans 3:19), for all are condemned by it. God does not judge on a curve or by moral averages. He judges according to His own flawless character, and as the prophet Habakkuk declared, His eyes are too pure than to look upon iniquity (1:13) - whether it be the iniquity of idolatry and murder, or the iniquity of selfishness, lust or gossip. Thus, as Paul wrote in Romans, "by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified in His sight" (3:20). As the Psalmist said, "If you Yahweh should mark iniquities, who could stand?" (130:3).

We flatter ourselves if we believe that our moral goodness somehow outweighs the many ways in which we sin and fall short of God's glory. But even worse, we insult the unchanging and holy character of God if we believe that anything good done by ourselves could take away the offense and offensiveness of our unrighteous attitudes and actions which we have admittedly done before

God. God cannot deny Himself and simply pretend that we have not sinned, even if we wish to add to the balances a few kind deeds or decent attitudes (as humans might judge them).

Good works simply do not eliminate the fact of our past sins or atone for them. And as long as those sins stand in our record before God, we have no hope of forgiveness and communion with Him. This is clearly the message of the Torah, as well as the rest of God's inspired word. The penalty of sin must be paid by another, if we would personally hope to escape that penalty ourselves.

Christianity uniquely proclaims the coming of the Messiah, in accordance with God's inscripturated promises, to pay the price of sin and make atonement. Through faith in Him, God's people may be justified before the Lord without sacrificing His unchanging justice. This is at the heart of the Christian message. Without this heart of the gospel, neither Judaism nor Islam present an alternative which is both formally and materially adequate to the nature of God, the human condition, or the truths of God's word in Scripture."